

Community and Cultural Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 30th January, 2008.

Present:- Councillors Small (Chair), Dhaliwal, Dhillon, Grewal, Jenkins and Shine.

Co-opted Member Present:- Heather Mason.

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Aziz, Bains and L Khan.

PART I

24. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Small declared a personal interest in agenda items 3, 6 and 7 as she was a Board Member of People 1st (Slough). She would however remain and speak during consideration of these items.

25. Minutes

The minutes of the last meeting of the Panel held on 30th October, 2007 were approved as a correct record.

26. Police Operation in Slough Against Organised Crime

At the request of the Chair, the Interim Director of Community and Cultural Services updated the Panel on the Police operation that had taken place in Slough on 24th January, 2008. The Council had received an approach for assistance from the Metropolitan and Thames Valley Police forces who were undertaking a major operation in the town in respect of organised crime taking place in Westminster and Central London, some of which was believed to emanate from individuals living in the town. There was also concern that there may be “trafficked” children involved. As a result of the early morning raids, a total of 68 children had been found in 18 properties. Of these, the Police had concerns about the lack of clear parental responsibility for 10 children and, as a result, the Council was asked to temporarily care for them whilst further investigations were completed.

Of the ten children taken into temporary care, nine had now been returned to their parents with one 14 year old girl still in care whilst attempts were made to trace her parents. 24 arrests had been made and a number of individuals charged with offences largely relating to fraud and deception. It was stressed that no evidence had been found of any child trafficking as a result of these raids although a number of children’s parents had been out of the country. It was also noted that raids had been made elsewhere and further raids were being organised as the problem was by no means confined to Slough.

Members asked a number of questions on the issue. It was noted that a large number of individuals had been living in certain of the properties and Members sought clarification as to what action the Council was proposing to

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take in respect of houses in multiple occupation that were known to exist in the town but were not currently licensed. It was noted that a report on this matter was being considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 7th February, 2008.

In conclusion, Members paid tribute to the efforts of staff on the day and it was agreed that a letter of congratulation and thanks be forwarded to the relevant Officers.

Resolved - That the position be noted.

27. Customer Service Centre Update

The Director of Resources introduced a report updating the Panel on the current service level statistics in respect of the Customer Service Centre (CSC). The report highlighted a number of issues including the fact that volumes of business had increased massively, both by the telephone and face to face; the fact that the CSC had become a victim of its own success and this had led to problems during peak times when it was currently unable to provide a sufficiently responsive service to customers, leading to long waiting times; the fact that an action plan of options to address the issues was being drawn together, linked to the budget strategy which would be presented to the next meeting of the Customer Service and E-Government Working Party with a view to the potential solutions being considered as a way forward to improve service response times to all customers; and the fact that the next system upgrade would increase facilities for e-mail and e-forms to cover a wide range of services as well as an e-service facility on the website to enable customers to carry out some functions themselves. This upgrade would form the basis of a number of planned changes over the next year.

In conclusion, the Director commented that it was essential that the service produced the statistical information as now presented so that it was fully aware of volumes of activity and problem areas, such as currently where demand was exceeding expectations and, as a result, customer response times had been affected. Only by having detailed and accurate information could service improvements be recommended to enhance response times.

The Director noted that the current average wait for a telephone response at five and a half minutes was unacceptable and options were currently under consideration to improve this. However, with regard to face to face transactions, 80% of people who came into the CSC were able to have their query dealt with first time. In addition, it was felt that the building and the environment of the CSC were good but it was now important that the service to customers was substantially improved.

Members raised a number of issues of concern in the subsequent debate:-

- A Member expressed concern at the high level of “unspecified” information set out in the statistical charts. The Director commented that he accepted

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the need to improve the quality of the information collected but that, at the present time, all callers did not provide the requested information.

- A Member suggested that many individuals would prefer to complete and submit their forms on line so they did not have to wait at the CSC. It was pointed out that the next phase of implementation would enable far greater use of e-forms, etc and, as well as in their own homes, people would be able to transact business from computers in the libraries or those provided in the lobby of the CSC.
- A Member expressed the view that the attitude of some staff in the CSC in terms of customer care was poor with clients being treated very shabbily. The Director undertook to discuss the particular issues concerned with the Member and raise the issue with the CSC Manager. If training issues were identified they would be pursued.
- A Member commented that on one recent occasion there had only been one receptionist on duty with a long queue forming whilst telephone staff were apparently unoccupied. He requested that better management of the staff in the facility was undertaken to avoid this situation occurring.
- A Ward Member referred to the under-utilisation of the Britwell Talk Shop. The previous facility had been well used and had enabled people to have their queries dealt with locally. However, since its refurbishment, the facility was much less user friendly and far less used and he believed that it would be to be benefit of the Council to review the current situation. The Director accepted that the facility had not yet been properly promoted but that, once it had, it would be reviewed to ensure that it was providing the right service. He would take on board the points raised by the Member.
- A Member asked that the Council's website should provide the opening times of the CSC which she had been unable to locate. In addition, it would be helpful for a map of both the location of the CSC and the other Council buildings and this would be looked into.
- There was concern amongst Members that, when they phoned telephone numbers in People 1st, they were directed to voicemail which then redirected them to the CSC. The CSC then redirected them back to the voicemail message. The Chief Executive of People 1st commented that tenants were encouraged to ring MyCouncil first, as if individual Officers' numbers were given out to the public, they would be inundated with calls and unable to carry out their other duties. However, he was conscious of the issue raised by Members and would look into the matter to ensure that the current unsatisfactory situation was rectified.
- Members requested that when particular casework issues were being dealt with by a specific Officer in People 1st, etc then the tenant or resident should be provided with a direct telephone number so that he or she could deal with that Officer direct rather than having to go through the CSC on every occasion.

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On completion of the questioning and debate, the Panel requested that a standing item be included on future Panel agendas updating it on the current position with the CSC. In addition, it was agreed that the report to the next meeting should include information about the current workflow process in dealing with queries so that Members could better understand it. It was also suggested that details of the “mystery shopper” facility should be provided.

Resolved - That the current position be noted and that a standing agenda item be included on all future agendas updating the Panel on progress with the Customer Service Centre.

28. Performance Monitoring 2007/08 - Budget Strategy 2008/09 to 2010/11

The Director of Resources presented his report highlighting the implications of the provisional local government finance settlement for 2008/09 which represented the first of a three year fixed funding settlement for local authorities, based on the government’s Comprehensive Spending Review 2007. The report also updated Members on the latest revenue monitoring for the Council. The Director highlighted those matters included within the appendices to the report which related to the portfolio of this Panel.

A Member requested additional explanation of the baseline transfers referred to in paragraph 5.6 of the report and the Director undertook to write to him.

There was some concern that the report did not sufficiently “pull out” those matters relating to the Panel’s responsibilities and the Director was asked to ensure that future reports did so.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

29. Proposed Flexible Home Repair Assistance Loan Scheme

The Private Sector Housing Manager presented details of a bid to obtain a Regional Housing Board grant for the purpose of funding a flexible home repair assistance loan scheme. Local authorities had to ensure that at least 70% of vulnerable households in the private sector were in decent accommodation by 2010, rising to 75% by 2020. The Council, in keeping with many other authorities, experienced a high demand for grant assistance, such grants being means tested. The provision of loans would assist people to meet their contributions to the work. Legislation gave authorities increased discretion to develop their own approaches to improving housing conditions in the private sector and local authorities were being encouraged to find alternative ways of financing housing improvement, in particular through low cost loans and equity release loans. Authorities were also being asked to work together to achieve economies of scale.

Studies had shown that whilst a large proportion of property owners were “equity rich but income poor”, they experienced problems in taking out loans for repair works because minimum loans were too large, interest rates were

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too high or current lenders were too inflexible. In an effort to address these issues, discussions had been taking place with a number of other authorities in the Thames Valley area with 17 of them now agreeing to form a consortium to bid for £20m over a three year period to address the issues. A bid of £16m had been approved by the government with the funds being released from April of this year. It was hoped to have the full infrastructure in place to commence lending by June, 2008 and a full project plan was currently being prepared.

The Officer provided full details of the proposals which it was believed would prove a useful way of making the necessary funding available to vulnerable members of the community.

Members asked a number of questions of detail on the scheme and following discussion it was

Resolved - That the proposals be noted and welcomed.

30. HRA Funding of the Neighbourhood Wardens Scheme

The Assistant Director, Housing reported that it had been agreed that, in future, the neighbourhood warden service would be funded from the General Fund rather than from the Housing Revenue Account as the service was Borough-wide and not merely for the benefit of Council tenants. Members welcomed this proposal.

A Britwell Ward Councillor commented that he believed residents within the Britwell Parish Council area were paying twice for the grounds maintenance service in their area as they paid for the service through their Council Tax to the Borough but, in addition, the Parish Council was charged for the work which was paid for out of the Parish precept. He believed that this was an anomaly which needed to be rectified. It was agreed that Officers look into the issue raised by the Member and reply to him.

31. People 1st (Slough) - Update

The Chief Executive of People 1st (Slough) updated the meeting on progress, particularly with regard to the recent inspection of its service by the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate. As Members were aware, the Inspectorate had given the service a good, two star rating with promising prospects for improvement. This meant that the £45m of capital funding would now be released to undertake works to bring Council properties up to the decent homes standard. This equated to some £35m for internal works and about £9m for environmental improvements. He further reported that, as there were underspends elsewhere in the decent homes programme nationally, it had been agreed to accelerate the programme in Slough so that a total of £21m would be available over the next 15 months, rather than the previously proposed sum of £8.5m per year. As all of the arrangements had already been put in place, work could now proceed rapidly with a view to providing a total of some 501 new kitchens, 453 bathrooms and a 134 new

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central heating systems during the first three months of the current year. In addition, some 800 new secure by design doors would be provided. Overall, this meant that it was anticipated that the programme would be completed by 2011.

The Inspectors had recognised the improvements that had taken place in all areas, not least the repairs service and had recognised that the organisation was self-aware and had robust plans in place for improvement where necessary. There were a number of areas where further work was required, not least in respect of communications at ward level and moves were already in place to improve communications with local Councillors. It was also proposed to improve the ALMO's involvement with residents and work was taking place in this regard.

Another area requiring attention was the issue of the local government equality standard which had not yet reached the requisite level although it was recognised that a great deal of good work was taking place. In addition, the ALMO was relatively high cost and there were issues with customer access through the telephone contact centre which needed to be addressed.

He also referred to the fact that People 1st would be moving from its current accommodation in Wellington House to Airways House in Langley Road. This had the advantage of providing better facilities for face to face contact with tenants although there were issues of location which were currently being considered.

Members congratulated Mr Billany and his staff for a substantial achievement and raised the following issues in the subsequent discussion:-

- A Member referred to the forthcoming change in the way housing benefit was paid to tenants in that it would be paid to them for them in turn to pay to the Council, rather than being paid direct as at present. There was concern that this could lead to a reduction in rent collection levels. The Director acknowledged that this was a concern but that good information and advice would be needed for tenants to ensure that they were fully aware of their responsibility to pay their rent. Members requested that a report be submitted to the Panel outlining the approach to be taken on this matter.
- A Member asked whether the issue of residents being asked to pay for repairs before they were carried out was still occurring. The Director responded that charges were only made for repairs where wilful damage occurred and he was not aware that there was now an issue with staff giving inappropriate information to tenants in this regard.
- A Member asked whether it would be possible for the organisation to deal with its own calls from tenants rather than routing them through the Customer Service Centre. The Director responded that as the current arrangement had only been in place for six months and had not yet fully

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bedded down, it would be necessary to give the arrangements further time before making any changes to the current arrangements.

- Members expressed the view that there were currently not enough partnership arrangements between the ALMO and residents' and tenants' associations around the Borough. The Director confirmed that whilst there were good working relationships with the Tenants' and Residents' Federation, it was important that links were forged with a range of other organisations around the Borough so that a more comprehensive range of views could be taken into account.
- A Member suggested that it might be helpful if an Officer from People 1st attended certain ward surgery meetings and the Officer undertook to consider this.

Resolved - That the current position be noted and welcomed.

32. Forward Work Programme

It was agreed that the unprogrammed item on neighbourhood policy within the Borough, etc be considered at the next meeting of the Panel, if possible. It was further agreed that the remaining unprogrammed items be dealt with at the July meeting.

33. Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting of the Panel taking place on Thursday, 27th March, 2008 be held at 5.00 p.m. at the Customer Service Centre, Landmark Place and that all Members of the Council be invited to attend for a short tour of the facility.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 p.m. and closed at 9.05 p.m.)