

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Thursday, 11th September, 2008.

Present:- Councillors Grewal (Chair), Basharat, Coad, Davis, Haines, Matloob, Munkley and Walsh.

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Anderson, Plimmer, Shine and Swindlehurst.

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Dodds.

PART I

19. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Grewal advised that he would be declaring an interest in respect of agenda item 8 (Call-Ins: Appropriation of Land at Upton Court Park) as he had signed a petition opposing the development on land behind behind Castlevue Road. He would vacate the Chair during this item and would not take part in any debate and voting.

20. Minutes

The minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 3rd July, 2008 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

21. Presentation - Annual Attitude Survey

The Chair welcomed Michael Fountain and Becki Jarvis from QA Research who made a presentation to the Committee outlining the results of the latest Annual Attitude Survey undertaken earlier this year seeking the views of local residents on their town and on the services provided by the Borough Council. The face to face interviews of some 1,575 residents had been undertaken between January and March of this year and, overall, showed an increase in satisfaction with the Borough Council and with Slough as a place to live. There were however differences when the figures were broken down as between those who had lived in Slough for longer than six years with fewer of them being satisfied with the Council than those who had moved to Slough more recently. Variations in satisfaction levels in different wards were also highlighted by the results. The survey also outlined residents' views as to what they considered to be the main problems in their local areas and the services that needed improving. It was noted that there was an improving level of satisfaction expressed by residents when asked how well they felt informed about Council services.

On completion of the presentation, Members raised a number of matters of detail including the following:-

- Clarification was sought as to whether the survey comprised a true cross-section of the local population and this was confirmed. The interviews had

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been specifically targeted to ensure that they covered a broad age range as well as individuals from the various ethnic groups in the town. A sample of 1,575 was considered to be large enough to provide very meaningful results.

- Members sought clarification as to whether further detail at ward level could be provided by QA Research as this would prove extremely useful for local Councillors. It was confirmed that further detailed information was available on the website and any Members who wished it could be sent more detailed ward and ethnic breakdowns where available. It was however noted that the smaller the sample, the less reliable the information would be.
- A Member referred to the issue raised at the time of the last survey as regards the low levels of satisfaction expressed by long term white residents and whether there had been any change in the levels of satisfaction expressed. It was agreed that this particular issue would be examined and the Member advised accordingly.

It was agreed that Committee Members would be forwarded further detailed information as requested and, in addition, any Members requiring further detail should submit an appropriate request.

The Chair, in thanking Mr Fountain and Ms Jarvis for their presentation, highlighted the fact that it was now important for Commissioners, Officers and the Scrutiny Members to use this information to highlight those areas where Council performance was less than satisfactory to help set future priorities.

Resolved - That the presentation be noted and that the additional information requested by Members be circulated.

22. Art at the Centre - Update

The Assistant Director (Transport and Planning) and the Project Manager presented a report outlining progress of the Art at the Centre Scheme in Slough High Street following a number of concerns raised by the Committee at its last meeting. The report outlined the background to the scheme, the measures that had been taken to address Members' concerns and concluded that the project was now proceeding well with many of the previous issues having been overcome. Members were reminded that any such scheme in a busy High Street would always prove problematical but it was felt that a good working relationship had been established with the contractors and the work was now proceeding satisfactorily.

Members raised the following issues in the subsequent discussion:-

- A Member asked whether the quality of the workmanship in laying of the granite blocks had now improved and whether, if problems continued, there were financial penalties in place. She also asked whether the slabs were being properly sealed. Officers responded that very high standards

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had been set from the outset and there had been some initial problems with the quality of the workmanship with the contractors having taken some time to come up to the required standard. However the situation had now improved significantly with good quality work being undertaken. No claims had been received as yet from the contractor. It was confirmed that the slabs were being appropriately sealed. In response to a further question about the dirty appearance of the slabs, Officers confirmed that the scheme had not yet been handed over and the contractors would have to complete the work to the Council's satisfaction. Officers were currently looking into how best to ensure the satisfactory long term maintenance of the granite and machines were being specifically brought in to ensure that the surface was kept clean.

- A Member sought confirmation that the frosted glass used in certain of the lighting installations was durable enough and whether action had been taken to ensure that tree roots did not lift the blocks. Officers confirmed that all necessary tests had been undertaken on the glass and they were up to the necessary standard. Work had been undertaken to ensure that tree roots did not cause problems to the paving.
- Members sought assurances that, once completed, proper cleaning and delittering regimes would be in place to ensure that the appearance of the High Street remained acceptable. The Officers responded that the appropriate Departments were currently liaising to ensure that there was a high level of cleansing in the area as well as improved enforcement against littering.
- A Member referred to the relocation of the hackney carriage rank from the High Street outside Marks and Spencer to Church Street and expressed concern at this decision. Officers explained that one of the main aims of the project was to remove traffic from the High Street. The area in question was a "shared surface" between vehicles and pedestrians and it was important that as few vehicles as possible used the area. Accordingly, to make the scheme work properly it was important to remove as many vehicles as possible from the High Street area, hence the need to move the hackney carriage stand. There had been full consultation with all stakeholders with some six meetings with representatives of the hackney carriage trade and three consultation letters forwarded. There had therefore been ample opportunity for trade representatives to raise their concerns. Further meetings were ongoing however to meet some of the trade's concerns with the new stand having been redesigned so that it could take additional vehicles.
- A Member asked whether spot health and safety checks were being undertaken in the High Street to ensure that there were no safety issues for either the contractor's staff or for members of the public. The Officer confirmed that some breaches of health and safety best practice had been observed and these had been rigorously pursued. There had been some slips and trips by pedestrians slightly above the average but, overall, the scheme was proceeding well and in a safe manner.

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- Clarification was sought as to whether it would be possible to prevent utility companies from undertaking works in the High Street and possibly spoiling the appearance of the completed scheme. The Officer advised that it was possible to declare a “protected zone” for a five year period so that works could not be carried out in the area, barring emergencies. In any case, contractors would have to fully reinstate the area in question.
- A Member asked whether this work would assist in revitalising the town centre area and whether it would be better to concentrate on trying to provide better shopping facilities and night life. Officers commented that improving the appearance of the High Street was just one step but, by taking the initiative, it would hopefully encourage other parties to contribute. He believed that the High Street works had already encouraged investment in the area and talks were taking place with the shopping centre owners with a view to major new investments in the area. In addition, the Heart of Slough project would bring significant benefits to the town centre area.
- A Member asked whether the granite surface was safe in freezing weather. He was advised that the surfacing was designed so that water drained away and should not freeze on the surface. However, as with any surfacing, gritting would need to be carried out in very severe weather.
- A Member asked whether there was sufficient disabled car parking available in the new scheme and sought clarification as to whether there would be additional provision for hackney carriages. The Officers responded that whilst there was a reduction overall in marked blue badge bays, if the additional spaces outside MyCouncil were included, there was in fact an increase during the daytime in the number of spaces available, given that other private vehicles would not be able to enter the area. With regard to hackney carriages, there was indeed an increase in the overall provision for these to wait. Reference was also made to the fact that the hackney carriage stand at the rear of the Queensmere shopping centre was still in use.

Members concluded that there had been a significant improvement in the management of the scheme and it was -

Resolved - That the current position be noted and welcomed.

23. Neighbourhood Shops Policy

The Commissioner for Neighbourhoods and Renewal introduced this report which he had requested be submitted to the Committee following concerns expressed about the inflexibility of the current policy on neighbourhood shops in terms of mixes of use on large parades. His personal view was that the restriction in the policy on limiting A3 uses was of concern as this allowed no flexibility for the larger parades and potentially conflicted with the policy aim of encouraging uses that met the needs of local people. He felt that there was a need to review the policy with an increase in flexibility and he believed that

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this was a review that could usefully be carried out by either the Committee or the appropriate Scrutiny Panel.

Members raised the following issues in the subsequent discussion:-

- A Member expressed his support for neighbourhood shops and the hope that the Council could encourage shops which provided a range of healthy and fresh food as well as other day to day items. He believed that there was a real opportunity for the Council to frame a policy that encouraged such uses rather than a proliferation of fast food shops which appeared to be the trend at the present time. Given the very poor health statistics for the Slough population, this was an area where the Council could make a difference by framing its policy in such a way that such uses were encouraged.
- Other Members, whilst sympathising with the views expressed, felt that it was extremely difficult for these types of businesses to prosper as their viability was affected by the large supermarkets with local butchers and greengrocers that had existed previously having gone out of business in recent years as they were unable to compete. Accordingly, it would be difficult for the Council to frame a policy that could overcome this significant issue.
- Some Committee Members were of the view that the current policy should be maintained as it had served the local communities well. However, other Members felt that a review would be appropriate as there were a number of inconsistencies in the current policy that needed to be addressed. Unless a review was undertaken, it would not be possible to examine ways of improving local shops to the benefit of their local communities.
- Some Members felt that, rather an overall policy, it would be preferable for each particular case to be looked at on its individual merits.
- There was some concern at the accuracy of the figures in the report as regards the number of neighbourhood shops in various locations. Officers confirmed that there were currently 86 neighbourhood shops in the town and that the list would be updated prior to any review taking place.

Officers commented that they considered that the current policy was not working to the benefit of local communities and that they would welcome a review by Members. It was noted that the Council's neighbourhood shops were managed on its behalf by Colliers and, if Members agreed that a review should take place, then they should be requested to bring forward a report to the Committee outlining the key issues.

The Chair proposed that, following the work to be undertaken by the Council's consultants Colliers, the matter be scrutinised by the Neighbourhoods and Renewal Panel. However, the majority view of the Committee was that the matter should be scrutinised by this Committee and this was agreed.

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Resolved -

- (a) That the Council's consultants Colliers, be requested to undertake a piece of work outlining current issues and recommendations on an amended neighbourhood shops policy.
- (b) That the report be submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration in due course.

24. Performance, Financial and HR Reporting 2008/09

The Strategic Director of Resources submitted his report outlining the Council's overall performance in financial and performance management terms. The reports highlighted those bids that had been submitted by Ward Members for utilisation of the £25,000 per ward made available under the LABGI scheme.

Members noted that there were a number of errors in the table and these would be corrected prior to the list being submitted to the Cabinet. Reference was also made to a particular issue in the Central Ward where one of the Ward Councillors was not aware of one of the proposed schemes and this matter would be taken up by the Officer. Members requested that, when corrected, the updated table should be forwarded to all Committee Members.

Resolved - That the report be noted.

25. Consultation Document - 'Real People - Real Power: Improving Local Accountability'

The Scrutiny Officer submitted a report summarising the first in a series of 'Communities in Control' consultations following on from a recent White Paper of July, 2008. The consultation covered implementation of the overview and scrutiny provisions in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and sought views on how to develop overview and scrutiny powers to hold local officers to account and how to facilitate the work of Councillors. It was proposed to submit a report on the issue to the Scrutiny Development Steering Group for their views and for a draft response to the consultation to be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee in October.

Members expressed some concerns at the possibility of devolution of power to individual citizens and a consequent lack of accountability, given that elected Members who took decisions were fully accountable through the ballot box. Having said this, it was agreed that it was important to find ways of involving local people more widely in the scrutiny process and in local government generally.

Another Member requested that the way in which petitions were dealt with by the Council should also be taken on board in this matter.

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Resolved - That this matter be referred to the Scrutiny Development Steering Group and reported back to the next meeting of this Committee in October and that the issues raised by Members be taken into account.

26. **Call-Ins: Appropriation of Land at Upton Court Park and Closure of Haymill Bar**

Councillor Grewal vacated the Chair during consideration of this item and Councillor Basharat took the Chair.

Members were advised that this report was largely for information in that it advised the Committee, as required in the Constitution, of recent decisions taken by the Cabinet in respect of call-ins concerning the appropriation of land at Upton Court Park and the closure of the Haymill bar. The only item where the Committee was able to take a decision was in respect of whether or not to undertake post-decision scrutiny of the decision taken by the Cabinet on the appropriation of land at Upton Court Park. However, it was pointed out by Officers that the decision of the Cabinet on 10th March, 2008 had subsequently been rescinded by the Cabinet following the change of administration in May and, accordingly, any such scrutiny would be somewhat historical in nature given that matters had moved on since then and a new, comprehensive report on the matter was to be submitted to the Committee on 17th September and to the Cabinet on the 24th.

Members took the view that a post-decision scrutiny would be useful, given the number of inaccuracies in the previous papers which had misled Members. Accordingly, it was felt that lessons could be learned from the way in which the previous exercise had been conducted as well as an explanation as to why the inaccuracies had occurred.

Following further debate, it was moved by Councillor Coad and seconded by Councillor Munkley that a post-decision scrutiny exercise be undertaken into this matter and this was put and carried by six votes to one vote.

On completion of the item, Councillor Grewal resumed in the Chair.

Resolved – That post-decision scrutiny be undertaken of the decision of the Cabinet of 10th March, 2008 concerning the appropriation of land at Upton Court Park.

27. **Training Event - 'Scrutiny of Strategic Partnerships'**

The Scrutiny Officer submitted a report outlining a training opportunity for Members on 13th October looking at the potential for the effective scrutiny of partnerships. It was agreed that full details be submitted to all Scrutiny Members.

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28. Report Back on Overview and Scrutiny Best Practice Presentation by Bracknell Forest Borough Council

The Scrutiny Officer submitted a report outlining the learning points arising from the extremely well attended Scrutiny Best Practice presentation by representatives of Bracknell Forest Borough Council recently. She thanked those Members who had attended the event.

29. Forward Agenda Plan

Noted.

30. Date of Next Meeting

Thursday, 9th October, 2008.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 p.m. and closed at 9.58 p.m.)