

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Monday, 29th June, 2015.

Present:- Councillors Dar, Davis, N Holledge, Malik, Mansoor, Morris, Plenty, Sohal and Wright

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillor Smith

PART 1

1. Declarations of Interest

Councillors Malik and Morris declared their interests as tenants in Slough Borough Council (SBC) property.

2. Election of Chair

The nomination of Councillor Plenty was moved and seconded. There being no other nominations it was:-

Resolved - That Councillor Plenty be appointed Chair of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel for the municipal year 2015 – 16.

3. Election of Vice Chair

The nomination of Councillor Morris was moved and seconded. There being no other nominations it was:-

Resolved - That Councillor Morris be appointed Vice Chair of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel for the municipal year 2014 – 15.

4. Minutes of the last meeting held on 30th March 2015

Resolved: that the minutes of the meeting held on 30th March 2015 be approved as an accurate record.

5. Member Questions

Three questions were received from members before the meeting. The officers' responses were circulated, with the following comments made:

- In relation to water metering, it was requested that the information would be published on Streets Ahead in August 2015 as stated by officers. A wider campaign to inform tenants was also requested.

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- An item on loft insulation was requested for the meeting in September 2015.

In addition, information on resident satisfaction surveys was distributed. Members requested that the Tenants Board would be asked to identify the 20 key performance indicators they felt were most important, and that these would be reported to the Panel in September 2015. The Panel would then decide on the future approach to take on this.

Resolved: that items on loft insulation and tenant satisfaction KPIs be added to the agenda for September's meeting.

6. Subletting fraud amnesty

The amnesty took place in March 2015. It was based on research undertaken in conjunction with other local authorities with experience of such campaigns. The amnesty was publicised through posters, radio advertisements and press releases. The intended audience was those who had sublet property without releasing the seriousness of the issue.

Subletters were requested to hand in their keys without facing sanction. After the amnesty, SBC would then pursue a hard line in pursuing those in breach of the law. 5 sets of keys were received in the 6 weeks after the amnesty; this was SBC's largest ever haul. Given the cost of the campaign (£70) and the Audit Commission's estimate of a cost of £18-20,000 per sublet property, this represented a good return on expenditure. Given this success it was intended that a future amnesty, with a longer lead-in time to allow the message to spread more widely, would be undertaken.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- March 2015 had been chosen as it offered some lead-in time to the amnesty, whilst also ensuring that it could be completed before the end of the financial year. Whilst some authorities had opted for 2 months, SBC chose 1 month to keep the campaign focused.
- Spot checks were undertaken by SBC Housing Officers; the aim was to cover all stock at least once every 3 years. However, given the fact that Interserve visited properties more frequently, it would be part of the new retendered contract to improve efficiency.
- Properties involved in the campaign were for general use, and would be returned to that use.
- Subletting was an offence, legislated by the Prevention of Social Housing Fraud Act 2013. Courts had the option of sentencing those in contravention of the Act, with custodial sentences possible.
- The amnesty only applied to SBC housing stock. Housing associations were not directly involved, although some did employ Housing Fraud Officers.
- Writing to tenants to increase awareness of the campaign was an option for the next amnesty, albeit an expensive one. Tenants have also been asked to identify potential subletting they have observed.

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- A variety of tools would be used to identify subletting. As well as referrals from the public, work with the National Fraud Initiative was examining other methods of pinpointing concerns (e.g. data matching).
- Since the end of the amnesty, fraud investigators were working on several cases based on referrals from the public and SBC officers. These would take about 2 months to process; members were asked to report any possible examples of which they were aware in their areas.
- Those who were evicted rarely required rehousing; as a result, the burden placed on housing stock by the campaign was light.

7. A4 Brands Hill

The road design had been part of the 'Better Bus Fund' work. The decision had been made to use a three lane structure with two lanes in one direction and the other for the opposite direction (S2 + 1). The two lanes had been allocated to the direction travelling towards Heathrow, with the hatched area removed from the road. Other aspects of the design had ended the waiting restrictions and moved the bus stops; these were previously opposite each other, but one had now been relocated outside the Holiday Inn. The initial feedback had led to the design being made permanent.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Both S2 + 1 roads and S3 roads (where the two outside lanes were designated for the two opposing directions, and the middle lane could be used for overtaking by either) were often seen as dangerous; members questioned the choice of the former design for the A4. The original proposal had been made by an officer who formerly worked for SBC and was based on the requirements of the Better Bus Fund.
- The safety issues raised by the choice had been through a safety audit overseen by independent inspectors and Thames Valley Police. The flow had been improved as anticipated, whilst safety was still being monitored (although statistics could only be based on incidents reported to the police).
- The direction allocated only one of the three lanes had experienced congestion, particularly in the evening rush hour.
- The new site of the bus stop had been chosen to allow enough room for cars to pass, although buses retained the right of way when pulling out. However, it was recognised that driver impatience with this arrangement could be problematic.
- Members raised the absence of a solid white line; the response was that the current road markings complied with the current Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions (TSRGD). A similar arrangement was used in Uxbridge (in the Oxford Road area of Denham). The Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB) contained the relevant standards on this matter and could be circulated.
- Members also questioned the absence of a solid white line and the non-selection of the alternative WS2 + 1 model for the road. Stage 1, 2 and 3 safety audits had been conducted and produced guidance advocating the current design.

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- Local residents had concerns about the safety of the present design, with the middle lane a particular concern. Heavy goods vehicles, cars overtaking buses travelling West and the lack of enforcement for vehicles parked on double yellow lines were raised as issues. In addition, cars looking to turn left off the A4 were encountering difficulty, as were cars turning right into the BP garage across 2 lanes of oncoming traffic.
- However, officers responded that it was not possible to legislate for poor driver behaviour in all circumstances.
- With regards to the BP garage, the lack of a 'no right turn' sign was queried. Even if there were problems with enforcing this policy, its deterrent effect may still help improve road safety.
- Those turning on to the A4 from narrow side roads also encountered problems. Members asked if the mouths of these roads could be widened; however, the opportunity for this was limited given the data cable in the area and also the bollards and pavements there.
- The report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2012 had specified that bus stop lay byes would be filled in where the speed limit was 30mph or below. However, this had taken place on a 40mph road.
- Transport for London's support for the design was based on improved bus times. Officers replied that the 81 bus route was now 5 minutes quicker on average and also more consistent.
- The work being undertaken on the bridges on Stoke Poges Lane and Leigh Road were having an impact. The design of the road would be reappraised once these works had been completed.
- Heathrow Airport had stated that it hoped air quality would be improved by the new design. Members sought proof that this had been the case.
- Members also stated that, whilst those used to the system had learnt how to drive as required, newcomers could struggle with the set up. In particular, the issue of road priority and right of way was unclearly marked in some locations (e.g. Laburnum Grove).
- Officers responded that old arrows were removed using ball bearings, with the Transport Team updating road markings straight afterwards.

Resolved:

- 1) That an agenda item on the A4 Brands Hill road be added to the agenda for the meeting in September 2015.
- 2) That the report for this item include the following information:
 - a) The TSRGD guidance (with particularly reference to the issue of a solid white line);
 - b) The DMRB standards and guidance relating to the selection of the S2 + 1 road design;
 - c) The stage 1, 2 and 3 safety audits;
 - d) The reasoning for the decision not to place a 'no right turn's sign by the BP garage;
 - e) The decision to apply the bus stop lay by policy to a 40mph road; and
 - f) Data on air quality before and after the new road layout;

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8. Real time passenger information for bus service

The target for accurate real time passenger information (RTPI) was 75%. In the last 5 – 6 weeks, the service had improved and was now consistently in the mid-high 60's%. Some routes remained a problem, with buses requiring replacement machinery. This would be completed by the end of June 2015 and should help with the 75% target being hit on a daily basis. Software upgrades on ticket machines and the investment in new buses would augment this trend.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- In terms of fitting the machinery in the factory prior to receipt of new buses, the current supplier was given notice as to RTPI requirements. There was a pre-delivery inspection, part of which was checking that this had been installed. The cost for fitting was £250 per bus. In addition, 10 aerials were available for fitting on temporary buses; this cost £200-300.
- There had been an issue with 'phantom data', where updates would appear for buses which were not running only to disappear. This was confusing local residents. SBC and First were aware of this issue, which was often caused by old timetables. The system had a 'time out' facility, leading to the information being deleted after a time. Work was being undertaken on rectifying this.
- The 75% target was being worked on. This included training for bus controllers and the fitting out of buses due to be active in October 2015. Improved communications were also helping with the issue.

9. Forward Work Programme

In addition to the points noted earlier in the minutes, the following changes were to be made to the work programme:

Resolved:

- 1) That the item on domestic abuse and the VMAP pilot be taken in October 2015.
- 2) That the following items on housing be added to the work programme:
 - a) Regulatory framework for housing – September 2015.
 - b) Slough housing management standards – to be allocated.
 - c) Supported housing – to be allocated.
- 3) That the items on the SSE contract and parking facilities for elderly and disabled residents be taken in January 2016.
- 4) That the draft terms of reference for a Housing Task & Finish Group be circulated to members of the Panel.

10. Date of Next Meeting - 3rd September 2015

Chair

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(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.35 pm)