

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Thursday, 21st July, 2016.

Present:- Councillors Anderson, Davis, N Holledge, Morris, Plenty, Swindlehurst and Wright

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillor Nazir

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Rana and Rasib

PART 1

1. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were provided in relation to the meeting's business.

2. Election of Chair for 2016 - 17

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

Resolved: That Cllr Plenty be elected to the position of Chair of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel for the Municipal Year 2016 – 17.

(At this point, Cllr Plenty took the Chair).

3. Election of Vice-Chair for 2016 - 17

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

Resolved: That Cllr Morris be elected to the position of Vice-Chair of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel for the Municipal Year 2016 – 17.

4. Minutes of the last meeting held on 29th March 2016

Resolved: that the minutes of the meeting on 29th March 2016 be approved as an accurate record.

5. Member Questions

Responses to member's questions raised prior to the meeting were circulated to members. The following points were raised in subsequent discussions:

Allotments

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- The Panel voiced concerns that undertakings given in October 2015 were not being fulfilled. Plots remained vacant despite a lengthy waiting list; the Chair of the Panel would circulate the Slough Allotments Federation (SAF) plan with members.
- The lack of a dedicated officer, and the problems regarding the cost efficiency of the service, had led to it losing priority in Slough Borough Council (SBC) plans. Members wished to discuss whether the service was sustainable, cost effective and could benefit from increased one-off fees or more radical reshaping of the service (e.g. adoption of a social enterprise model).
- Members also had concerns over fly tipping, and whether this was the primary purpose for which some renting allotments were using plots.

Housing

- SBC were accommodating more leavers since the policy was changed to facilitate this. However, members remained concerned that those on the register were not being housed as efficiently as was desirable.
- Recent case law had begun to erode the effect of some of the changes introduced by SBC to its allocation scheme. For this reason, it was decided that the scheme would be reviewed as part of the developing Housing Strategy. This would provide an opportunity to review the inclusion of care leavers in Band A. Given the statutory nature of this process, this would likely take around 6 – 9 months.
- SBC retained the duty of care to those who left the SBC area; this applied until they were 24. SBC held data on this to enable effective tracking of individuals, although acknowledged that there was still work required.

Resolved:

1. That an agenda item on allotments be added to the work programme for January 2017.
2. That officers would obtain in depth information on care leavers' housing and circulate to members of the Panel.

6. Transport Matters

The tabled report addressed the following matters:

Real Time Passenger Information

- Detection rates remained disappointing, at around 60 – 65%. This had risen to around 75 – 80%, but the constant changes in fleet (despite agreements that new buses would have the equipment) had negatively impact on detection.
- A meeting with Buckinghamshire County Council had discussed similar issues with the same service. The service was open for re-procurement in early 2017, and should this be undertaken then key performance indicators (KPIs) would be set with clear minimum thresholds.

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- On the 81 service, data could be accessed. However, JMW's system could not display this data in a meaningful fashion for bus users.
- The 7 series buses were not showing up on the system, despite the length of their service in Slough.
- Overall, SBC's subsidy for the service was just under £200,000. The matter had been escalated to First's Managing Director, but SBC had exhausted the options available under the present contract.
- A meeting would take place with First and JMW on the issue; SBC was not satisfied with explanations related to software issues.
- Should re-procurement be pursued regarding RTPI, it was anticipated that an impact on detection rates should be felt in May 2017. RTPI was a standing item in meetings with First (who would be invited to attend any future agenda items discussing the matter).
- Punctuality of services was 92% on average.
- Bus use had decreased, from approximately 5 ¼ million trips per year to approximately 4 ¼ million. However, much of this was felt to have been caused by alterations in concessionary travel arrangements; First was being asked to ascertain the precise reasons. SBC was also exploring the potential for amending travel pass policy, especially for the 7 Series buses, alongside relevant partner organisations.

Yellow box junctions

- SBC was willing to introduce new ones (e.g. Stoke Road) and recognised the problems that existed as some busier junctions. However, they were ignored by a significant number of motorists and Thames Valley Police had clarified that enforcement of this was a low priority for them.
- With regards to the A4, SBC was putting in place yellow box junctions at Williams Street and at the heart of Slough. It would also consider placing one at the Three Tuns, but was not considering such an arrangement for High Street Langley. Despite the limitations mentioned in the point above, it was recognised that even in this situation their existence could mitigate traffic issues.

Bus and taxi fares

- The home to school taxi service was tendered to Cambridge Education, leaving SBC with no influence on matters. However, SBC would be bringing this back in house when Cambridge Education's responsibilities changed in October 2016, and SBC was also looking to save costs through using school bus services where available and appropriate.
- SBC had asked why lowering fuel costs had not led to a decrease in fares. In response, it was informed that other costs had risen.
- SBC was also looking to introduce a clean air zone and was discussing the use of electric buses as part of this.

Hollow Hill Lane

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- A press release had been issued by SBC on 20th July regarding the experimental closure. The SMaRT scheme (early 2017) and HS2 (awaiting Royal Assent) were major projects. In addition, Cemex were looking to extract gravel in the Richings Park area.
- Given these pressures, the closure of Chequers Bridge would start on 2nd August 2016 and last for 18 months. A further press release would be issued in later July 2016.
- Members raised concerns that the full reasons for this measure were not clear with the public. Part of this could be explained by the technical nature of present communications, which may require amendment in future.
- However, it needed to be considered that the Heathrow Express Depot needed to move from Old Oak Common by 2019.

Programming of road works

- SBC had been under pressure to complete any road works by the end of the financial year (April 2017). However, the situation had been improved to an extent by an extension of this to July 2017.
- SBC's main contractors (Balfour Beatty) have put in place mechanisms to mitigate the impact of the workload. At first, the east side of the SBC area had been targeted, and this focus would move to the west in October 2016. The work in the area of the Copthorne roundabout would finish in November 2016; however, at the present time the contractor had limited traffic to one lane, causing congestion. Night work had been used to try and limit this impact.
- In cases where there appeared to be little or no work conducted in closed-off areas, SBC was raising such cases but was limited in its powers to stop practices.

Canal basin

- The planned work would connect the North and South banks and ensure that users would avoid having to use the lengthy loop around the station. A cycle route formed part of the bid to the Local Enterprise Partnership.
- The Asset Management team were dealing with any issues related to Slough Urban Renewal. The Canal and River Trust and the local residents' forum were fully involved in the process.

Resolved:

1. That an agenda item on RTPI would be added to the meeting on 8th September 2016, with First to send a representative to attend.
2. That an agenda item on Hollow Hill Lane / Chequers Bridge would be added to the meeting for 8th September 2016.
3. That the bid on proposals for the Canal Basin be circulated to members of the Panel.

7. Housing - Performance Management and Reporting

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The Housing team were currently working on an updated Business Plan for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). This would investigate matters such as the future of Slough's housing stock, the viability of present arrangements and proposed future arrangements, potential challenges posed by future legislation (e.g. higher rents for families with a combined income in excess of £31,000 per annum) and whether SBC would be forced to sell its higher valued housing stock. As part of this, effective management of SBC's housing stock would be central to its continued service.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Whilst the plans would take some time to complete, the main ideas will have been formed by the autumn of 2016.
- SBC officers and Councillors had worked together in formulating the indicators used in monthly reporting. These would also be taken as an agenda item by the Panel, once every 6 months to widen the debate on performance. However, officers were keen to select the best measures rather than overburden the Panel with information which may be of limited use for anyone beyond experts in the area.
- Performance on void properties was currently below expectations. However, there was a limited amount of supplementary information to use in analysis, as SBC did not directly control this matter. Some benchmarking had been undertaken to establish the level of performance, but this would need to be revisited.
- There could be some opportunity to undertake a wider investigation into SBC's garage stock, and the feasibility for investment to improve it.
- Many of the indicators were presently rated as performing badly under the 'red / amber / green' system.
- Members requested that Councillors and residents should be involved in establishing a Panel to discuss performance, referring major concerns to SBC's Scrutiny Function. Online information for residents on performance should also be available.
- SBC was committed to ensuring that residents were heard in discussion on housing performance. In addition, it wanted to ensure that a wide range of views were heard, rather than having such forums dominated by a select group of residents.
- By January 2017, SBC would be in full possession of the facts on its housing stock. This would improve service provision and ensure that re-procurement of support services would be undertaken in the most effective manner available.

Resolved:

1. That SBC officers undertake work on forming a Panel including Councillors and residents, dedicated to evaluating the performance of the Housing Service.
2. That Councillors be nominated by the Panel to meet with the Resident's Panel.
3. That future reports on performance include refinements based on the Panel's requests (e.g. benchmarking data).

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4. That the Panel receive an agenda item on the wider engagement strategy for residents at the meeting on 3rd November 2016.
5. That an agenda item on Housing Repair, Maintenance and Improvement (RMI) be added to the work programme as appropriate.

8. Local Authority Housing - Service Charges

The report updated the Panel on the impact of changes in rent policy. As these were no longer set by SBC, £30 million would be lost to the service over the 30 year period of the HRA Business Plan. Service charges had risen by 0.8%, but this would be taken up by inflation and therefore not change the service received by tenants.

The Housing Management IT system had now been completed. This would eventually allow tenants to see an itemised list of the costs for services received; however, the repairs part had not yet been integrated onto the system, so information was not complete. As a result, the information was not yet publically available; the new system would be tested in December 2016 to ascertain the accuracy of this information before it was shared with residents. When practicable, SBC was committed to full disclosure of information on service charges.

Resolved: that the update be noted.

9. Forward Work Programme

Resolved: that the following items be added to the work programme:

- 8th September 2016: Real Time Passenger Information and Hollow Hill Lane road closures.
- 3rd November 2016: Engagement strategy for housing.
- 17th January 2017: Allotments and housing KPIs.
- 4th April 2017: Development Initiative Slough Housing.
- To be allocated dates as appropriate:
 - Housing Revenue Account Business Plan
 - Regeneration Strategy
 - Housing Repair, Maintenance and Improvement (RMI)
 - Service Charge Information
 - Garages
 - Local Plan.

10. Date of Next Meeting - 8th September 2016

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.31 pm and closed at 9.27 pm)