

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Tuesday, 17th January, 2017.

Present:- Councillors Plenty (Chair), Anderson, Davis, N Holledge, Rana, Swindlehurst and Wright

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor Morris and Rasib

PART 1

31. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Plenty declared his activity on the issue of the road closure at Hollow Hill Lane and Mansion Lane.

32. Minutes of the last meeting held on 3rd November 2016

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 3rd November 2016 be approved as an accurate record.

33. Actions Arising

The Panel was presented with a copy of the residents' newsletter, as had been pledged to be undertaken in minute 22 of the previous meeting. Meanwhile, the issue of downsizing (minute 25) was now included in the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan; this also included consideration of the two tier rent levels which were part of this plan.

Resolved: That the update on actions arising be noted.

34. Member Questions

No members' questions were submitted.

35. Alternatives to Market Lane

Members raised concerns as to whether all options had been pursued, or if the relief road was the sole alternative being scoped. In response, the Panel was reminded that a package of mitigation was under development and that meetings with community groups had been interrupted by demands for a relief road, hence the focus of the report. At present, Slough Borough Council (SBC) were continuing with the experimental closure while entering negotiations with High Speed Two (HS2). HS2 would in principle support a realignment of the road and work around the bridge as indicated in their current programme, however a mitigation package would only be possible if a permanent closure is put forward and would be subject to the outcome of negotiations. As a result, SBC's current options are relatively binary, in terms of having the road either open or closed; the other source of any mitigation package (Western Rail Link to Heathrow (WRLtH)) was facing delay. As a result, the only party SBC are currently in discussions with are HS2.

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The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The work required by HS2 could be undertaken through a series of temporary road closures. However, when WRLtH comes forward this would require a permanent closure.
- The experimental scheme had been discussed in the context of using its findings to obtain funding for an alternative. However, the circumstances had evolved given the delays being experienced by HS2.
- The Panel raised questions as to whether the report contained sufficient information upon which to make an informed decision. However, the uncertainty surrounding WRLtH's exact timescale had impacted on the amount of detail SBC could currently provide.
- Members of the Panel asked for the experimental scheme to be ended as soon as possible. The impact of the scheme had been largely in line with expectations, feedback from local residents was almost entirely negative (only those directly by the bridge, who noted a quieter environment, had differed) and school journey times had increased at the start of the scheme (although this had improved). In addition, the Panel were informed that the only data currently being collected was that being taken by permanent traffic counters. Given this, the Panel recommended that they refer their request for the scheme's termination to Cabinet at the first available opportunity.
- Further to this, SBC had written to the Department for Transport requesting information on the required length of the experimental scheme. The Government's response delegated this decision to SBC's legal team. Given the impact the scheme was having, the Panel was very clear in its desire to see this impact ended as soon as possible.
- SBC had also dedicated a section of its website to the road network in the area.
- The Panel raised a desire for future decision making to involve Councillors. Officers requested that this should be referred to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Highways and Democratic Services to ensure that procedures could be put in place for this. However, whichever structure was used in discussion the decision would ultimately remain with Cabinet given SBC's Constitution.
- Cabinet would make this decision with the assistance of recommendations made by SBC officers. Should officers be dissatisfied with the final mitigation offer, they could recommend the permanent reopening of the road.
- The length of the delay to WRLtH was subject to Parliamentary activity. As a result, the process should now be considered as a staged matter rather than one integrated process. Given HS2 would principally support re-opening the road and realigning the bridge, the Panel was content to recommend this as the basis for the recommendation to be made to Cabinet in 2017.
- The Panel also argued that the bypass needed greater consideration than it had been given in the report. This would be a major

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transformation for the road network, and therefore needed a more developed discussion before any decision was made on its feasibility.

- Local residents had also expressed a view that the current procedures meant that changes were being done to their locality, rather than for it. They also felt that it was being done with a view to getting them prepared for a permanent solution which would have a negative impact on traffic in the area. As a result, the Panel called for clearer communications with residents in future, and also for any consultation to have a direct impact on proposals; at present, residents were cynical as to the meaningfulness of consultation processes. The representative of local residents present at the meeting reflected these views and called for the reopening of the route as the only effective means of North – South travel in the locality.

Resolved:

1. That the Panel recommend, given the fact that only permanent counters are currently collecting data relating to the impact of the bridge closure, Cabinet ends the experimental scheme at the first opportunity.
2. That the Panel recommend Slough Borough Council (SBC) develop a package based on the reopening of Market Lane and a realigned bridge (as offered by HS2).

36. Slough Allotments

The report was in response to an agenda item taken by the Panel on 28th October 2015. At that time, SBC recognised that the service was in a poor state; much work had been undertaken since then. Whilst allotments were still a 'work in progress' and required improvement, it was now considerably better (a matter recognised by the Panel). SBC wished to thank the Slough Allotments Federation (SAF) for their support in this process.

In particular, the areas which had improved were:

- The clearing of waste.
- Clarity on the role of the allotment holder regarding waste and cultivation.
- The reduction of the waiting list from approximately 1,000 to 143. All these 143 would be offered a plot by the end of February 2017.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Some bills had been issued to plot holders. However, the necessary information management for this needed completion; in the long term, this would become an automated process.
- The relationship with SAF had improved. However, they remained concerned over a) the service still not being strategic and b) the sustainability of the service. In particular, the service having no dedicated full time officer (responsibility lay with a staff member who

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had other duties, meaning that allotments got attention when time allowed) had been raised.

- Flytipping also remained an issue. This was being worked on, and also other matters which could be completed and closed (e.g. checking the waiting list for people who had moved or were deceased) had been resolved to improve the service. However, it remained the case that the service needed the voluntary work provided by SAF.
- The next phase of service improvement was currently being designed.
- The Panel raised concerns as to whether the £58,000 budget allocated to the service would prevent this progress being eroded. The next phase of service improvement would include a review of this, as well as staffing options (e.g. potential use of SBC's Parks Team) and colony management. SAF would also hold SBC to account, whilst the possibility of Green Flag accreditation for allotments could be investigated.
- Given the state the service had been in, fee increases were not currently planned. Comparisons with neighbouring authorities would be made to justify any such future rise, but this would not be made a) before the service was at a level to justify a rise and b) allotment holders had been notified.
- The Panel and SBC officers wished to declare their thanks to Carrie Darby (SAF Chair) for her work. This was appreciated and offered an example of community spirit in action.

Resolved: That the Panel would support a one-off request for additional funding for the allotment service.

37. 2017/18 Housing Rents And Service Charges

The power to set rents had been taken by central Government; this was to reduce by 1% a year for 4 years, with 2017 – 18 to be the second of these years. Service charges were based on the Retail Price Index measurement of inflation and would be raised on 3rd April 2017. This was Government policy and SBC's longstanding practice.

The service had been left with a greater degree of autonomy than previously assumed given the Government's decision to abandon 'Pay To Stay' legislation and also plans to enforce the sale of higher value council housing. A Government White Paper on housing was expected in the next 2 months, and any major changes it proposed would be reported to Councillors.

The Panel made the following points in discussion:

- Members had no power over setting the rent levels.
- The Housing Revenue Account had been based on a forecast based on less favourable outcomes. The options appraisal had started, with Savills having been recruited to assist. SBC was restricted in its borrowing and the stock condition survey would also reveal much information regarding SBC's position. As a result, the Housing Revenue Account would err on the side of caution in its predictions.

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- The re-procurement of the Repairs, Maintenance and Improvements (RMI) contract offered SBC significant opportunities to make changes in the future. In particular, SBC would be emphasising the role of innovation in service provision for those seeking to tender for the contract.
- The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had taken the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan as an agenda item at 2 meetings. Since the first of these, the affordable rents policy had been developed using information taken from London Boroughs. SBC had taken the decision to let out the Ledgers Road properties at the lower rent rate, a decision which the Overview and Scrutiny Committee supported. This would now be presented to Cabinet in March 2017. The rent level offered to potential tenants would be based on their level of income.
- Services charges included caretaking, cleaning, grounds maintenance and other similar upkeep work. This was along the lines of service traditionally understood by local authorities.

(At this point, Councillor Anderson left the meeting).

- Electricity bills were more volatile than general goods measured in inflation statistics. In order to protect SBC and residents from this, the Facilities Team put electricity out to broker to ensure that the utility was purchased from the most appropriate supplier. Residents paid for the energy they used; insulation and cladding had also helped reduce bills.
- Water, like electricity, was bulk purchased. Given Thames Water's stated intention of moving all residents to water meters by 2022, SBC would need to formulate a strategy on the matter. However, it was recognised that some tenants benefited from present arrangements and no changes would be enforced without at least 6 months' notice.

Resolved: That the Panel note the report.

38. Housing and Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Overview Indicators

The suite of performance indicators (SOIs) had been compiled after a request made by the Panel on 21st July 2016. SBC officers wished to thank Cllrs Holledge and Morris for their work as part of the group which helped form the SOIs; these had been designed to reflect a wide range of aspects of 2 services (Housing and Neighbourhoods). They were also selected with reference to the Joint Wellbeing Strategy and the 5 Year Plan. A 'red, amber, green' RAG rating system was used to evaluate overall progress on each SOI.

The Panel was asked to agree to the SOIs selected, and also ask the service to return on 26th June 2017 with a full dashboard of SOIs and a 'report by exception' (i.e. more detailed information on SOIs which were a concern).

The Panel made the following points in discussion:

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- The Audit and Corporate Governance Committee had raised concerns that high priority matters had not been resolved, whilst less urgent issues had been prioritised. Members were asked to track the progress of SOIs to monitor the prioritisation of activity, as well as the progress of the SOIs themselves.
- The data collected by SBC allowed for trend analysis, as well as the traditional retrospective analysis of past information. The dashboard was live and intended to be used for interactive discussion and interrogation of trends; it would evolve as this process was undertaken.
- SBC's key statutory obligations focused on gas safety and similar matters. Compliance on fire risks could be covered by inspections on a 2 yearly cycle, so this was not measured as SBC wished to avoid SOIs which could easily be met at 100% success rate. Whilst the SOIs would measure the performance of SBC in areas of legal obligation where suitable, SBC also did not want to create an "industry" of data creation.
- The 'by exception' report would include any SOIs which were either rated red or had been amber for 2 consecutive periods.
- SBC was prioritising fraud; 7 cases had been identified and this would continue where grounds for suspicion existed.

Resolved: That the Panel take a report on SOIs on 26th June 2017.

39. Slough Real Time Passenger Information

The Panel had clearly indicated its dissatisfaction with current arrangements and the resulting detection rates. As a result, it was looking for any new specification to offer a structure which would avoid a repetition of this. The new specification would include key performance indicators and set minimum performance levels. At present, SBC was in a position to offer an outline agreement; the Panel would be happy to take a fuller version in future.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- One of the first questions raised in the process of creating the new specification was the possibility of companies other than First Bus providing services in Slough. Ad hoc 'plug and play' solutions were available should such a situation arise.
- There was no date for the completion of the new specification. It was more important to ensure that the successor arrangement worked, rather than it was in place by a predetermined time.
- Any new system should be able to adapt, given the pace of technological development in the present age.
- Members were concerned that 'changes to the bus fleet' was frequently raised as a problem. However, the 7 series bus fleet had not changed but was as susceptible to poor performance as other routes.
- Members also stressed the importance of ensuring RTPi suppliers and bus companies worked together in future. Previously, a culture of blame shifting had been identified.

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- Whilst the cost of the new system was hard to gauge, it was the intention to reduce the overall cost.
- The headings used in the circulated document would be the headings in the final specification. Technical details would be added later.

Resolved:

1. That the Panel stress the importance of ensuring that any successor system works before the new contract is offered.
2. That the specification return to the Panel when suitable.

40. Forward Work Programme

Resolved: That, in addition to the points made in previous minutes, the garage fraud audit be moved to 26th June 2017.

41. Attendance Record

Resolved: That the attendance record be noted.

42. Date of Next Meeting - 2nd March 2017

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.07 pm)