

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Thursday, 2nd November, 2017.

Present:- Councillors Plenty (Chair), Anderson (from 6.38pm), Davis, Mann, Swindlehurst (from 6.36pm) and Wright

In attendance for item 30 Councillors Sadiq, Parmar, Sarfraz and A Sandhu (held jointly with Overview and Scrutiny Committee):-

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Kelly, N Holledge and Rasib

PART 1

26. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were provided in relation to the business to be considered at the meeting.

27. Minutes of the last meeting held on 7th September 2017

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 7th September 2017 be approved as a correct record.

28. Action Progress Report

Resolved: That the update on progress made on actions be noted.

29. Member Questions

(At this point, Cllr Swindlehurst entered the meeting).

Fixed Penalty Notices had ceased, as they had not been cost effective. Even the potential increase in the amount levied on offenders may not alter this; however, the situation was not yet entirely clear and was one which members may wish to continue to monitor.

(At this point, Cllr Anderson entered the meeting).

Payments under the Incentives Scheme totalled approximately £250,000. These could also be used to augment the Homelessness Prevention Strategy; as a result, the issue would be discussed further under an agenda item on the matter scheduled for 18th January 2018.

The extent to which fly tipping was caused by private individuals, commercial enterprises and the turnover of housing was unclear. In addition, the tools available to Slough Borough Council (SBC) to stop fly tipping were unclear. As a result, the Panel requested that an agenda item on the issue be taken on 4th April 2018.

The extent to which SBC was encouraging staff to move away from car usage, or was ensuring that its policies were co-ordinated at a corporate level to emphasise environmental concerns, was questioned. As a result, the Panel asked for an agenda item on this to be taken on 4th April 2018; this would also have a view towards commissioning further research.

Resolved:

1. That an agenda item on fly tipping be added to the agenda for 4th April 2018.
2. That an agenda item on establishing SBC as 'an exemplar green Council' (with a view to commissioning a Task & Finish Group) be added to the agenda for 4th April 2018.

30. Update On The Review Of The Local Plan 2013 - 2036

The existence of a Local Plan was a legal requirement for local authorities; the Plan had to be reviewed every 5 years. The Plan also had to cover a 20 year period. The Issues and Options Report had been produced in early 2017 and been put out to consultation.

The overall vision was for Slough to be a place where residents would want to 'live, work, rest, play and stay'. In particular, the issue of staying was emphasised as Slough had traditionally had a particularly transient population. The option which had been most contentious had been the Northern expansion into South Buckinghamshire. This had seen numerous individual objections lodged as was as the threat of legal action. However, SBC's preferred spatial option had been formed and retained this as part of it.

Sites for housing had been identified, whilst the local economy also required short term and long term protection. The intensification of the suburbs was also a central theme of the Plan, whilst protect of green areas would also be borne in mind. SBC was committed to avoiding the spread of infill development altering the balance of areas; these various considerations had been included in the preferred strategy. An area of particular focus would be a square mile in the heart of Slough; this included new flats, shopping and the regeneration of Queensmere. Meanwhile, other areas (e.g. Langley, Cippenham) had been selected for further development.

Areas in need of particular attention in recent months had been Heathrow and the local housing market. Heathrow was in need of mitigation from 1st November 2017 onwards, whilst the Northern expansion was crucial in rebalancing the local housing market (e.g. suitable accommodation for families). The expansion would also require schools, local shops, surgeries and similar amenities to make it a functioning community. As a result, this made SBC's Local Plan more susceptible to external factors than most, as well as being subject to the impact of decisions made by external investors.

Once the overall strategy was completed, the Plan was vital to its implementation. However, the 3rd runway at Heathrow would need to be

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completed first; by this time, the final form of the Northern expansion could also be clear. This, however, did mean the enacting of the Local Plan would be delayed. In addition, Queensmere and the Observatory were to be demolished. They would be replaced with 50 shops, a cinema, parking and leisure facilities, but this transition period was currently estimated at 3 years.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Flats would only be built in very specifically selected areas of Cippenham. However, it was not categorised as suburban and therefore would not be protected in the same manner as such locations.
- The Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead oppose the 3rd runway at Heathrow. However, this should not hamper the Local Plan as the affected sites were not as extensive as the Northern expansion. In addition, SBC was opposed to their Local Plan given the absence of social housing. Whilst South Buckinghamshire were currently protecting their green belt, it may be the case that they may be required to use it for housing in the long term.
- Should South Buckinghamshire's objections produce an impasse, SBC would still be in a position to state to the inspector that it had undertaken the work required by Government. Luton had encountered similar issues with Central Bedfordshire and not been found to be in breach of its responsibilities.
- Of the challenges identified, housing had taken priority to an extent.
- Consultation on the town centre would take place at the end of 2017, with the resulting planning application scheduled for April 2018. Once this was completed, the demolition of the existing facilities would start. To mitigate the impact of this, a phased approach to the building work would be taken whilst 'pop ups' would be encouraged to set up in the town centre. However, disruption was inevitable.
- A lack of engagement in consultation exercises was recognised, and had been a historical issue. A variety of solutions had been attempted (e.g. visits to Parish Councils, using meetings of business organisations) but take up remained disappointing. Officers were prepared to investigate any other methods for increasing participation that were suitable.
- Consultation could also be seen by residents as lacking meaning if the decision went against the majority view expressed by residents; however, this was in the nature of the process on occasion. This was particularly the case if objections raised did not have substantive grounds. However, participation did rise if it related to matters that were of specific local interest rather than high level strategy.
- Landowners traditionally want as much development on their sites as possible. However, SBC had often turned down applications on the basis that they affected areas such as flood plains or country parks. As a result, there was a significant amount of more attractive new housing areas in the Plan, although some of these were of a fairly high density.
- It was acknowledged that the timescales around Heathrow were slipping; the consultation was meant to be underway by the time of the

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meeting but was still yet to start. The principles of the Spatial Strategy were outlined in the report.

- Once the Plan was in place, the degree to which planning applications could be justified by its provisions would be given significant weight. However, in the period before its formal adoption this weight would not be as great.
- Infrastructure money could be obtained through Section 106 funds and the Community Infrastructure Levy. However, the latter had not been used due to the current lack of affordable housing.

Resolved:

1. That the following matters be borne in mind in the completion of the Local Plan:
 - Space for infrastructure and playing fields
 - The need for high quality design
 - Suitable transport facilities
 - A mixture of types of housing
 - A variety of retail options
 - Landscaping and the creation of a 'tree rich' environment
2. That the Local Plan return as an agenda item in the next Municipal Year.

(At this point, the meeting adjourned at 7.45pm and reconvened at 7.58pm)

31. Resident Involvement

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Residents on the Residents' Board and the 2 related panels had remained relatively stable over the last 18 months. The level of turnover from the previous period had been dramatically reduced.
- Face to face meetings to discuss housing options had seen an increased level of engagement and participation.
- The Residents' Conference on 28th October had been well attended, saw a high level of dialogue and positive outcomes.
- The findings of the mystery shopping exercise had been shared with arvalo. As a result, some new policies had been introduced (e.g. named officers given as contact to service users).
- Quarterly figures were being compiled and used to measure KPIs, whilst an annual audit and review would also be undertaken. This would be available for the Panel to review in the autumn of 2018.

Resolved:

1. That an agenda item on the Annual Report on residents' experiences be taken in November 2018.
2. That the Panel be invited to a meeting of the Residents' Board.

32. The Voids Process And Performance Relating To Council Homes

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The process of demobilisation by the previous service providers had proved challenging. As a result, Osborne Property Services Limited (OPSL) had taken on more voids than was planned during the transition phase.
- The penalty structure for the previous contract had proved ineffective. One major new innovation in the new contract (as well as raising the levels of the penalties) would be that they would be levied automatically. As a result, this would avoid creating some of the antagonistic conversations raised by previous attempts to address the issue when it occurred.
- Staff would be transferred over in line with TUPE as appropriate by 1st December 2017.
- The previous contract had also allowed for subcontracting; the provider was therefore getting paid for a service they were not providing directly.
- OPSL would recognise trade unions for the purposes of individual rights but not collective bargaining.
- Prior to OPSL taking over the service, SBC had done a thorough analysis of the previous arrangement and its outcomes. This was with a view to the new contract giving SBC greater control over the contract. It was accepted that Interserve's performance level had been unacceptable. Whilst standards had been maintained in the early stages, they had slipped and been allowed to remain poor.
- SBC and OPSL would be co-located in the new office space; this would allow for on-going conversations rather than the previous, more distant relationship.
- The new governance arrangements would also provide support for a bottom-up system of information sharing; KPIs would also be a central element in monitoring performance.

Resolved:

1. That the Panel take an agenda item for information regarding OPSL's performance in the summer of 2018.
2. That the Panel take an agenda item on OPSL in the autumn of 2018.
3. That the Panel be invited to the opening ceremony of OPSL's tenure at Hawker House.

33. 5 Year Plan: Outcome 4 (Robust Regulation Of Private Rented Sector (PRS))

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The sector was particularly important in the Slough context; SBC was prioritising action against rogue landlords. Using the current Government's definition, 250 cases of rogue landlords had been identified. However, some of these appeared to relate to issues of competence rather than malicious intent.

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- Members also expressed concerns regarding matters that were not 'rogue' as defined by regulations, but penalised tenants (e.g. deposits being charged at high rates). SBC would use its licensing regime to bolster self-regulation and ensure that landlords were clear on their role and responsibilities. Enforcement was not the most effective route, given the time and cost involved. However, SBC's powers in areas such as requesting reasonable deposit levels were limited in the current regulatory climate.
- The team overseeing the sector had increased from 4 posts to 7, although some of these were not yet filled.
- SBC would investigate the possibility of local licensing. However, at present local authorities could only impose criteria on very specific grounds (e.g. anti social behaviour). These also needed to be backed by evidence and presented to central Government.
- The expansion of the team had allowed for increased issuing of warrants regarding the exploitation of tenants. It had also assisted in the development of relationships with agencies.
- Licensing on houses in multiple occupation had been trialled in Chalvey. This had provided benefits, and SBC had also compiled data for each ward. A paper to Cabinet on the matter was due to be presented to Cabinet in January 2018.
- Owners were responsible for subletting or the over occupation of properties. SBC had the power to take action in these cases under the Housing Act.
- The Building Research Establishment report identified 73 houses in multiple occupation which were covered by mandatory licensing. However, it was estimated that there were 2,500 such houses in Slough not subject to this regime. Many of these were hidden; it could also be hard to prove as landlords may evict them unlawfully should they anticipate a visit.

Resolved:

1. That the Panel support the expansion of the Chalvey pilot across Slough.
2. That the Panel ask officers to investigate the relative merits of targeting resources on rogue landlords rather than universal registration.

34. Fire Safety - Verbal Update

This update was provided as the last information provided on the matter was in the aftermath of the Grenfell disaster. Since then, SBC had undertaken action on the issue.

Slough had 4 high rise and 40 low rise flats, with the high rise buildings prioritised. Broom and Poplar were having urgent work undertaken on them at the time of this meeting. However, it should be emphasised that this was precautionary; their cladding was not the same as Grenfell. The focus of efforts was on investigating the extent to which compartmentation could be used as means of preventing the spread of fire, the potential costs involved and the viability of such work. Meanwhile, the design and cladding materials

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used in low rise flats were completely different to those at Grenfell, but SBC was working with Saviles and the Fire Service. This was to ensure that the highest standards of fire safety were maintained and also to see if any work was required by changes in legislation. Sprinkler systems for the 2 high rise blocks currently under occupation was also a priority.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Sprinklers were a design standard on high rise blocks. However, the same policy was not clear for schools. SBC pursued a collaborative approach in these buildings.
- SBC paid for these works; if they had been sold, then responsibility transferred to the leaseholder. Fire safety and evacuation plans were also assessed in conjunction with the Fire Service.
- Members wished an official record to be made of their concerns over the commercial implications of the acquisition of Nova House. They also stated their displeasure with the lack of clarity provided to support the proposal and the lack of a business case. They also raised concerns over the lack of an evacuation plan for other SBC properties.

Resolved: That the update be noted.

35. Forward Work Programme

Resolved: That the work programme be noted.

36. Attendance Record

Resolved: That the attendance record be noted.

37. Date of Next Meeting - 16th January 2018 (Hawker House)

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.34 pm and closed at 9.08 pm)