

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Tuesday, 16th January, 2018.

Present:- Councillors Plenty (Chair), Davis, N Holledge, Parmar, Rasib, Sharif and Wright

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Kelly and Bal

PART 1

38. Declarations of Interest

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

39. Minutes of the last meeting held on 2nd November 2017

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 2nd November 2017 be approved as a correct record.

40. Action Progress Report

The expansion of the Chalvey pilot for licensing house in multiple occupation would be proposed to Cabinet in this Municipal Year. The targeting of resources on rogue landlords rather than a system of universal registration would also be included in proposals.

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

41. Member Questions

Following receipt of the response to the member questions, the Panel resolved the following:

Resolved: That the following information be provided:

- a. Whether Reading buses would be providing additional services to those currently offered.
- b. Whether bus passes for the elderly would be accepted on the 702 service.
- c. A written update on the tender for the Real Time Passenger Information service.

42. Neighbourhood and Housing Scrutiny Overview Indicators

The report was based on a series of performance indicators previously agreed with the Panel, and would be presented on a quarterly basis. The issue with gas servicing had been addressed with Gas Safety Registration now completed.

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The indicators demonstrated that performance had been in line with requirements; however, further details of the Panel's requirements for reporting were sought as this process was still in its early stages.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The information covered in the report referred to quarter 2; this period was prior to Osborne's assumption of responsibility for the Repairs, Maintenance and Improvements contract on 1st December 2017.
- As a result of this, some legacy issues from the Interserve contract remained. A higher number of electrical faults than anticipated had been detected by Osborne; this would be rectified. In addition, Osborne were manually checking all Gas Safety Registration certificates to ensure that records were accurate.
- SOI 1 (number of cases where positive action succeeded in preventing homelessness): this had been rated as 'amber' in quarter 1 due to issues with the tolerance for this indicator. However, members were unclear as to why a higher number here was a concern. Officers would investigate methods to ensure that reporting on this provided a clear analysis of the issues arising.
- In cases where the potential of homelessness became apparent, Slough Borough Council (SBC) had a variety of options (e.g. extend the arrangement, pay off the debts accrued, offer incentives to the landlord). The housing budget included provision for this.
- SOI 12 (number of right-to-buys completed this year): legislation circumscribed the options available to SBC. However, a drop in this indicator did mean that SBC was retaining a greater proportion of its housing stock.
- SOI 23 (number of SBC tenant households subject to the Benefits Cap): this indicator could have an impact on evictions; however, once again SBC's powers here were significantly limited. At present, SBC was not receiving many such cases and had an early warning system to alert officers to emerging issues. The Discretionary Housing Fund could also help in these households.
- SOI 30 (number of unlicensed houses in multiple occupancy): SBC recognised the work required on this matter; as a result, it would report back to the Panel in the autumn on licensing.

Resolved:

1. That the Panel receive the quarter 3 update on 4th April 2018.
2. That the Panel receive an update on the licensing of homes in multiple occupancy in September 2018.

43. Five Year Plan - Priority 5 Make Best Use of Existing Public Sector Housing Stock

Savills and SBC were working to maintain and improve their assets. As part of this, a stock condition survey had been undertaken; this had concluded that Slough's housing stock was in relatively good condition overall. An average expenditure of £68,000 per unit had been allocated on the basis of the level of

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work required; this data would be updated as work progressed. In order to undertake this work, planning would have to be made to ensure that money was not overspent in the early stages of the project, leaving subsequent work underfunded. The work was also mapped geographically to support the contractors in their efforts.

One particular issue was the cost of removing cladding from Broom and Poplar houses. This had also been included in the budget. However, overall very few properties in Slough required funding for improvements which would not be covered by the rise in the value of the property arising from the work. The potential of building extra floors on low or medium rise buildings would also be investigated, although the impact of such plans would require detailed consideration. This matter will be reported back to the Panel once sufficient progress had been made.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The £140 million allocated for each 10 year tranche would be adjusted for inflation.
- The decisions as to which properties would receive work in the early stages of the project was based on an amalgamation of results from the stock condition survey, information on local communities and the need to ensure work was focused in specific geographical areas. These factors were fed into a model, which produced an itinerary for those undertaking the work.
- The information on the project would be available to Councillors and residents. This would allow those impacted to follow progress on the project and when to expect future work on their property. However, some early work had uncovered legacy issues (e.g. asbestos, garages) which would have an impact on the first 18 months of the project. This was part of SBC's commitment to transparency in this work.
- Bedsits were recognised as having a high turnover, but were still homes and required upgrading. A significant number of such properties were antiquated; this sector would be managed over the next 7 – 10 years. Decisions such as whether to add beds, potential reassignment of these properties and how many of these needed to be retained to cater for young people looking for temporary housing would be part of this.
- There were concerns that temporary accommodation had the potential to become permanent. However, SBC had identified some areas that were only suitable for housing for 10 years; such locations would receive modular homes. Should this prove to be an appropriate and self-funding solution, it could be extended. It was also vital that such housing felt like a home for those using it.
- The Repairs, Maintenance and Improvements contract was based on the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan; this document factored in rent reductions enforced by the Government. Should there be a return to flat rent rates, this would allow for greater flexibility than had been assumed.

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- Surveys had been undertaken on garages and compiled costings on the basis of these. The first 26 sites had been prioritised on the basis of this; police input had been part of this to identify garages associated with anti-social behaviour or illegal activity.
- Voids were presently a priority; once this matter was resolved, other aspects of the process of housing people also worked more efficiently. Other options (e.g. compulsory purchase orders for empty private sector houses) were also available. The fact that 93% of properties had been visited thus far as part of the stock condition survey also assisted with allocation.
- SBC tenants were now starting to refer cases of leaseholders subletting property; this was a reversal of SBC's previous experience.
- Initiatives to incentivise downsizing required more work; it was recognised that this needed to be made more attractive, whilst also recognising the connection that some tenants had to their homes.
- Incentives for residents to take in lodgers where they had spare bedrooms had received low take up. SBC was willing to continue work in this area but realised that success was not guaranteed.

Resolved:

1. That the Panel receive an update on proposals to expand low and medium rise buildings once it was available.
2. That the Panel receive an update on the garage programme once it was available.
3. That the Panel recommend that incentivising downsizing be prioritised by the Housing Department.

44. Emergency Plan

The Emergency Plan was a legal requirement, as stipulated in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. This applied to Category 1 and Category 2 responders; SBC was listed as Category 1 (assigned as a core responder). Under this, SBC was mandated to work, communicate and mitigate risk with other such bodies (e.g. emergency services, NHS). The Emergency Plan was designed to ensure that such organisations were in a position to respond; specific scenarios would then be handled under sub-plans decided for such instances. At all times, there would be 3 officers on call; the Major Incident Manager, the Local Authority Liaison Officer and the Rest Centre Manager. Such staff were also supported through comprehensive training programmes.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The Plan had been updated in late 2017; the list of contacts was checked every 6 months and would also be updated as members of staff left or arrived at SBC. External numbers were generic and therefore not affected by changes in individual staff.
- The full impact of the Grenfell disaster was still not apparent as the inquiry was ongoing. However, it seemed clear that those involved in operating the Emergency Plan in Kensington & Chelsea lacked visibility. The requests for mutual aid in this case also seemed delayed

or absent. Given this, members were assured that there was a Memorandum of Understanding in operation across Berkshire.

- Drills and dummy runs were conducted involving all relevant staff. These involved both desk top activities and dummy runs and were conducted across agencies (including emergency services).
- Public awareness on responding to emergency situations had increased since the terrorist attacks of 2017. Most citizens were now aware of the need to clear the area rather than spectate.
- The Emergency Plan had been activated for the floods of early 2014. Kidlington was the command post and had operated well. Similar procedures had also been operated during the 2012 Olympic torch parade, with SBC supporting neighbouring authorities.
- Councillors were invited to attend the emergency planning training aimed at members.

Resolved: That the update be noted.

45. Development Initiative Slough Housing

The work was still at a preliminary stage, with 3 options available; the least appealing of these appeared to be continuing with the current arrangement. SBC were investigating creative solutions to the future of these properties, and would be undertaking discussions with those involved before making substantive proposals to Cabinet.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- Those renting DISH properties had no difference in their arrangements from other tenants. These properties were confined to one area of Slough.
- SBC intended to retain the properties and use their value to develop them; however, a significant amount of work and discussion was required to finalise any proposals. These proposals needed to be tested and would be developed over the coming months before being put before Cabinet.

Resolved:

1. That the Panel support the production of a report to be taken to Cabinet to make a decision on the preferred option.
2. That the Panel receive a report on these proposals prior to it being taken to Cabinet.

46. 2018/19 Housing Rents And Service Charges

Rents policy was circumscribed by legislation; however, there were indications that the present requirement to lower rents by 1% per year may be eased from 2020 onwards. Whilst such an assumption was not built into policy, it could allow SBC greater ability to invest and build. Meanwhile, service charges were due to rise 3% in line with the Consumer Price Index; it was the most relevant measure of inflation and alternative measurements of

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inflation could have a worse impact on residents. Government policy had also put back any moves to sell high value council homes.

The Panel raised the following points in discussion:

- The Government plans to sell high value council homes had been intended to help housing associations. However, the details of the policy had proved hard to resolve, leading to the delay. In particular, cross border issues and resolving who should build houses in the place of sold units had given rise to complexities.
- Negative rent increases had been a disincentive to building in some areas, leading to calls for a rethink on this policy from Government.

Resolved: That the Panel note the report.

47. Forward Work Programme

Resolved: That, in addition to the agenda items mentioned in previous minutes, the item on fly tipping be moved to 1st March 2018.

48. Attendance Record 2017 - 18

Resolved: That the attendance record be noted.

49. Date of Next Meeting - 1st March 2018

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.13 pm)