

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Tuesday, 15th January, 2019.

Present:- Councillors Plenty (Chair), Kelly (Vice-Chair), N Holledge, S Parmar, Rasib, Sabah, Shah and Wright

Non-Voting Co-opted Members: Paul Fuller and Morris Sless
(Residents Panel Board)

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor A Sandhu

PART 1

35. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were given in relation to the meeting's agenda items.

36. Minutes of the last meeting held on 1st November 2018

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 1st November 2018 be approved as a correct record.

37. Action Progress Report

Resolved –

- (a) That the Homelessness Plan and action plan referred to in minute 30 of the previous meeting be circulated to the Panel Members who would then determine the scheduling of a report, if appropriate;
- (b) That details of the Action Progress report be noted.

38. Member Questions

No Member questions had been submitted.

39. Local Plan for Slough 2013-36

The Scrutiny Panel considered a report which provided details of progress made on the Local Plan for Slough and which included an update on the preferred Spatial Strategy.

It was reported that in accordance with the ambition for Slough to become a place where people wanted to 'live, work, rest, play and stay' the Local Plan sought to provide a whole range of housing and facilities with an emphasis on enabling residents to remain in the Borough. The Strategy acknowledged the shortage of development land for identified housing and employment needs.

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Members were advised that the new Government methodology had calculated a figure of 912 residential units for Slough.

An officer advised that a new Transport Vision for the Centre of Slough would be submitted to Cabinet for consideration on 4th February 2019 and, if agreed, would have a significant impact on the development of elements of the Local Plan Spatial Strategy. Members interested in receiving further detail on the Vision should give notification through the Call In procedure.

Members were informed of proposed development sites including the town centre, mitigation of the impact of a third runway at Heathrow and the creation of a garden suburb to the north of Slough. It was noted that proposals had not yet been brought forward for the redevelopment of Queensmere and Observatory shopping centres but an announcement was expected shortly

In response to questions the Panel was informed that:-

- discussions were taking place with the owners of the former Marks and Spencers' site regarding the bringing forward of a development scheme. In the meantime the site was being tidied up;
- the sites for flatted developments in the centre of Slough were brownfield. The officer outlined the sites where family homes could be feasible including the former Horlicks site, Akzo Nobel, canal basin, and possibly Montem. Site values resulted in more flatted developments than houses due to houses taking up a disproportionate area due to gardens. In the absence of greenfield sites the proposed northern expansion would be the main location for new housing;
- in the suburban area the Council policy aimed to prevent the conversion of houses into flats and allowed limited infilling. Some renovation was acceptable but it was key that the character of the area was retained and that new areas developed their own distinctive character;
- there remained a need for one and two bedroom properties and the Local Plan reflected what Slough needed. The locations were not conducive to family housing and larger flats could result in the possibility of multiple occupation;
- there was currently a peak bulge in the numbers of primary school children and a combined 1,900 pupil primary and secondary school was being built in addition to two new secondary schools. The Grammar schools attracted pupils from a wide area which impacted on traffic/ transport. 62% of people who recently moved property had moved within Slough;
- developments such as the Laboratory had resulted from the prior approval process and had enabled the conversion of commercial development to residential without planning permission so normal planning policies did not apply. In cases of additional storeys to buildings, calculations for affordable housing were for the newly built storeys only;

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- provision of affordable housing, either as part of a development or as a contribution to offsite development, was not achievable if the developer was able to show that affordable housing was not viable on the site;
- no new housing was envisaged for the Colnbrook area. The aim was to ensure that HGV traffic from the Poyle Trading Estate did not use the Bath Road by, for example, the introduction of a bus gate;
- electric buses were one of the examples of the Low Emissions Strategy as was the reduction of traffic in Brands Hill;
- penalties for failure to build a development within the three years of the planning permission were not feasible because: planning permission was expensive, once footings commenced penalties could not be served, and developers would not take the gamble of being forced to build at a loss;
- outbuildings were acceptable when ancillary to the house but not for use for independent living;
- glossy promotional documents with regard to what could be achieved in the town centre, for example by way of Better Design, had been produced;
- the provision of allotments in the Local Plan would be hard to justify due to the level of housing need. The use of upper floors of developments as garden areas was encouraged, for example the top two floors of the Octagon site were for communal use;
- a feature had been made of the turning point at the canal basin. The raised level of the canal restricted views for the lower storeys of properties.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

40. Revised Housing Allocation Scheme 2018-2022

The Scrutiny Panel received an update on the first six months of the new Housing Allocations Scheme 2018-2022. Members were informed that the introduction of the Localism Act 2011 enabled local authorities to make local decisions on who should be given priority for the allocation of social housing. The main changes implemented from 1 May 2018 as set out in paragraph 5.3 to the report were explained by the officers with the use of case studies and discussed by the Panel. The officer stated that housing need remained a very difficult issue with 426 households currently in temporary accommodation which resulted in a £1.6m projected overspend. It was noted that approximately 400 lets had been achieved the previous year and 350 were projected for the current year.

In response to questions raised by the Panel, it was noted that:

- the community contribution qualification period of six months related to the requirement to be in employment, to volunteer or be in training. Where there was a legal duty to help those in the higher band the community contribution did not apply. In addition to the recent reduction in the community contribution qualifying period from one year to six months, the hours of employment required had reduced from 35

hours to 16 hours in recognition of the needs of single parents with young children. This time requirement was disregarded for those not working during school holiday periods;

- there had been a dramatic fall in the number of refusals of offers made since the reduction in the number of offers of accommodation to one offer only. This had enabled the achievement of more lettings and reduced the time previously spent in reviewing refusals. The offer letter set out the policy and the implications of refusal of a property. Those refusing an offer of accommodation could reapply for housing;
- applications for housing for those with severe medical need were assessed by an independent medical adviser;
- six units for key workers, funded through section 106 contributions, expected to be completed in August would hopefully be available in a month or two. There was a pilot scheme for teachers, agreed by Cabinet the previous year, with a commitment to house thirty a year and to roll out a programme for teachers and social workers working with vulnerable people. When a property became available the property details were circulated to Head Teachers and meetings with Head Teachers and interviews with prospective tenants were held;
- approximately eight care leavers had been housed the previous year and three in the current year. Officers worked jointly with the Trust and an offer was made when the Advisor indicated that the care leaver was ready for independent living;
- the guidelines to define overcrowding mirrored those for housing benefit. Those one bedroom short could join the waiting list but might not be made an offer without the community contribution. The living room counted as living space. Applications were considered in date order;
- the officers undertook to respond to a question from Councillor Parmar regarding the prioritisation of an individual family subsequent to his supplying additional information

Resolved – That the report and the impact of changes on specific groups affected by the main changes to the Allocations Policy be noted

41. Neighbourhoods Services Scrutiny Overview Indicators

Further to the 4th April Panel meeting, the Panel was provided with an update on the new set of Scrutiny Overview Indicators (SOI) for Neighbourhood Services covering quarters 1 and 2. It was noted that it was the first report presented for Neighbourhood Services.

The Panel was informed that following a restructure of both Neighbourhood Services and Strategic Housing Services on 1st November 2018, all subsequent reporting of the Scrutiny Overview Indicators detailed in the report and those reported by Strategic Housing would be presented via the Housing Services Scrutiny Panel report.

The officer introduced the report stating that work would take place to ensure the submission of more up to date information. Consultation would take place

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with the Chair as to the presentation of future reports. Particular attention was drawn to the following:

SOI 1 Work was being undertaken to improve the one red rag with regard to the average re-let times in quarter 2 of 111 days for Osbourne voids. It was currently in the region of 60 days. The Panel expressed disappointment at the reported figure but noted that improvements were being made.

SOI 5 the percentage of dwellings with a valid gas safety certificate was 100%.

SOI 12 (anti social behaviour related cases). It was noted that the green RAG total should read 845 and not 810 with all complaints meticulously recorded. In response to questions it was noted that: whilst untaxed cars was a DVLC responsibility any reports received were logged; overgrown gardens had to be a health and safety risk to the public in order for action to be taken; and the statistics for noise only applied to single family homes as there was a separate process for houses in multiple occupation.

Resolved –

- (a) That the Scrutiny Overview Indicators Dashboard be noted;
- (b) That the future reporting of Scrutiny Overview Indicators for Housing Services be noted.

42. Development Initiative for Slough Housing Ltd - Cabinet Proposals

The Panel received a verbal report from the Service Lead for Neighbourhood Services on the DISH review which proposed to extend the current financial vehicle in order to obtain clarity on borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board for additional social housing. It was noted that the creation of a mutual association provided the protection given by an arms length organisation to the 54 properties but also provided access to finance.

The Members were informed of the location of the current DISH properties and noted that the current residents would have seamless conditions with the continuation of lifetime assured tenancies without the right to buy. The social rents would continue. The properties were well maintained and the proposals allowed a sinking fund for investment

It was noted that the Government had abolished the Housing Revenue account cap due to the high demand for social housing. The Panel was informed of initiatives that could be considered by Slough Housing Ltd including: short term temporary accommodation on mobile home sites; modular units on garage sites or other sites not used for housing, not to build flats but, for example, bungalows for those discharged from hospital); opportunities for house extensions in gardens; bedsit bungalows joined to form one bedroom bungalows; the creation of an additional storey to flatted developments; designated schemes for greater care remodelling; construction

by SUR on the proposed northern suburb; maximising Council housing stock and land; and opportunities for allotments. It was recognised that green spaces were needed.

Resolved – That the verbal report be noted.

43. 2019/20 Housing Rents and Service Charges

A report outlining the proposed changes in the Housing rents and service charges for 2019/20 was discussed by the Scrutiny Panel prior to its consideration by Cabinet on 21st January 2019 and Council on 29th January.

The Members were informed that Council house dwelling rents for 2019/20 would decrease by 1% over the 2018/19 rent in accordance with government legislation. Other rents and social charges were to be linked with inflation based upon the September CPI figure resulting in an increase of 2.4% for garage rents, heating, utility and ancillary charges. Properties leased from James Elliman Homes would also increase by 2.4% which would provide some flexibility for investment and to recover some reduction in rents. The outcome of Government consultation on the increase in rents from 20-21 of CPI+1% for at least 5 years was awaited. Other changes likely to impact on the HRA and Council tenants were the rolling out of Universal Credit and HRA borrowing. The monetary terms of the 2.4% increase had not been modelled

The Government had abolished the Housing Revenue account cap but the detail was awaited. Slough had some headway and needed to ensure the right mix of housing stock. In response to a question it was advised that a change of government was not expected to change the proposals for rent levels currently being consulted on. Whilst the Council had discretion as to the charge of CPI+1% it would restore finance back to the Council for investment and repairs. The price of services contracted for by the Council were subject to inflationary pressures.

A Councillor referred to their experience of a request for a housing repair. The officers stated that if she provided the officers with information on the issue it would be investigated.

The Panel discussed the issue of personalised charges to be introduced the following year. The officers undertook to provide a briefing on the impact on tenants and leaseholders and how it would be modelled. It was agreed that this would initially be submitted to the Leaseholder and Residents Forums in March and then submitted to the Scrutiny Panel prior to decisions being made. The officer stated that service charges would probably be issued in January 2020 and a rent report with further modelling would be submitted to the Panel.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

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44. Forward Work Programme

Resolved – That the impact on tenants and leaseholders of the introduction of personalised charges be added to the work programme for January 2020.

45. Members' Attendance Record 2018/19

Resolved – That the attendance record be noted.

46. Date of Next Meeting - 28th February 2019

The date of the next meeting was confirmed at 28th February 2019.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.48 pm)