

Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Monday, 22nd June, 2020.

Present:- Councillors Hulme (Chair), Kelly (Vice-Chair), Ajaib, Gahir (from 6.36 pm), Matloob, Minhas, S Parmar, Sabah (from 6.42 pm) and Co-optee Trevor Pollard

Apologies for Absence:- Councillor M Holledge

PART 1

1. Declarations of Interest

None were declared.

2. To Ratify the Appointment of the Chair for 2020/21

Resolved – That Councillor Hulme be confirmed as the Chair of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel for 2020/21.

(Councillor Gahir joined the meeting)

3. To Ratify the Appointment of the Vice-Chair for 2020/21

Resolved – That Councillor Kelly be confirmed as the Vice-Chair of the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel for 2020/21.

4. Minutes of the last meeting held on 27th February 2020 and the extraordinary meeting held on 17th March 2020

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 27th February and the extraordinary meeting held on 17th March be approved as correct records.

5. Member Questions

None had been received.

(Councillor Sabah joined the meeting)

6. Covid-19 Response Update

The Interim Director Place and Development provided a presentation that outlined how the Council had responded to homelessness, rough sleeping, housing responsive repairs, and tenant and housing regulation matters during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

Following the conclusion of the presentation, the Chair invited comments and questions from Members.

During the course of the discussion, the following points were raised:

- It was noted that there was currently a backlog of 1,500 outstanding housing responsive repairs. It was reported that discussions were being held with Osborne Property Services Limited 'Osborne' (the company used by the Council to manage its housing assets) to understand the types of jobs outstanding and how these would be tackled. Emergency jobs were currently being dealt with and non-emergency work was being categorised in priority order. It was anticipated that additional staff resource would be required and a plan to clear the backlog was being developed. It was agreed that additional details regarding Osborne's plan to tackle the backlog of responsive repairs be circulated to the Panel.
- A Member queried if the newly identified rough sleepers were from Slough or had recently moved into the borough from London or elsewhere. It was explained that many new rough sleepers were from outside of Slough; some had migrated from the north of England in order to find employment. Rough sleepers from outside of the borough were encouraged to return to their local areas.

Resolved –

- (a) That the presentation and updates provided be noted.
- (b) That additional details regarding Osborne's plan to tackle the backlog of responsive repairs be circulated to the Panel.

7. Rough Sleeper Workshop

The Service Lead, Housing (People) Services introduced a report that set out the Council's proposed strategy to provide as many rough sleepers as possible with long-term accommodation, following the Covid-19 lockdown period, rather than those people returning to the streets.

On Friday 27th March 2020, the Government had issued a request to English local authorities to house all single homeless vulnerable people and rough sleepers within 48 hours. This required the provision of interim homeless accommodation for a cohort of people who would ordinarily not receive assistance from the Council. The lockdown period had enabled the Council's Outreach Team to engage with rough sleepers to assist in addressing underlying issues and to facilitate their return to a 'mainstream' way of life once the interim housing arrangements either ceased or were amended.

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Following the conclusion of the presentation, the Service Lead, Housing (People) Services invited comments and questions from the Panel.

During the course of the discussion, the following points were raised:

- A Member asked if accommodation had been provided to any tourists who had become stranded due to the Covid-19 lockdown. It was confirmed that no accommodation had been provided to holiday makers visiting Slough.
- It was noted that many people who experienced rough sleeping had complex issues and struggled to access the support services they needed. It was asked if during the lockdown period partner agencies had worked together to address these issues to help prevent people becoming homeless again. It was explained that multi-agency work had been undertaken; however specialist support accommodation was a finite resource in short supply. The Council had recently made a bid to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to fund a Complex Needs Worker post. The role would involve work with vulnerable single people to link them to mental health and drug services. The Tenancy Sustainability Officer also undertook work to link vulnerable homeless people with mental health and social services. It was acknowledged that general purpose accommodation was unsuitable for some homeless people and specialist supported housing was needed for those vulnerable people who faced complex needs. Officers would be undertaking further work to address this matter going forward.
- Clarification was sought regarding the status and support that was offered to rough sleepers who had no recourse to public funds. It was explained that this was a complex area and applied to a range of people, including EU nationals who had not exercised their treaty rights and in some circumstances UK nationals. It was explained that if a British person left the country for an extended period, on re-entering the UK they would be required to take a 'Habitual Resident Test'. If they failed to pass the test they would be unable to claim social benefits; and it was illegal for the Council to provide housing support to rough sleepers who had no recourse to public funds.
- It was noted that Slough rough sleepers included a diverse range of people, including many from neighbouring local authority areas, such as Hounslow, Ealing and Hillingdon. Often neighbouring local authorities discharged their duty to rough sleepers by housing them in Slough due to the large private rented sector being cheaper than that in their respective areas.

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- It was asked how long the interim accommodation for rough sleepers would be provided. It was explained that provision would cease at the end of June 2020 and people would then be housed in the private rented sector. The lockdown period had presented officers with an opportunity to engage with rough sleepers who normally did not engage with support services. A joined-up strategy would be established to provide long-term support to enable former rough sleepers to sustain a permanent tenancy.
- A Member asked what action the Council could take if a rough sleeper returned to the streets. It was explained that the person would receive help to engage with the appropriate support services. If a rough sleeper was demonstrating anti-social behaviour, such as begging, enforcement action could be taken but this required assistance from the police.
- It was asked if a person in temporary accommodation could claim Housing Benefits and if so, how many people were currently claiming this benefit. In addition, concern was raised that people entering Slough from other local authority areas may be given priority for housing over others who had been on the waiting list for longer. Concerns were raised that there may be an increased housing demand at the end of the furlough period and it was asked what plans were in place to mitigate an increase in homelessness. In response, it was explained that it was not possible to claim Housing Benefits for those accommodated in hotels or temporary provision. Only those categorised as 'statutory homeless' were eligible to claim Housing Benefit. Slough Council was beginning to house people outside of the borough to alleviate housing pressures and manage the level of demand. The incentive for those moving out of Slough borough was that larger and longer-term housing was available in more affordable areas outside of the South East of England. It was explained that the Council's Out of Borough Housing Policy was currently being reviewed.
- It was noted that the definitions of 'homeless' and 'rough sleeping' were different but the terms were often used interchangeably; therefore, it was crucial that clear communication was used in documents and on the Council's website.
- A Member asked how the Council was working with employers to encourage rough sleepers into employment. It was explained that one cohort of people had undertaken employment with Tesco supermarket. Tesco was keen to restart the scheme after the Covid-19 lockdown period. Officers were working hard to seek employment opportunities for rough sleepers. Discussions regarding employment opportunities were currently being held with Heathrow Academy and Osborne Property Services. It was felt the employment schemes were sustainable and the important consideration was ensuring people who joined the schemes were ready for employment to ensure the best chance of success

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On behalf of the Panel, the Chair thanked officers for the work undertaken during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

Resolved – That the Panel endorsed the following Lead Members and Directors recommendations, prior to the recommendations being submitted to Cabinet:

- (a) Assured Shorthold Tenancies (ASTs)/ licences be obtained from private sector landlords for each consenting individual currently in “All In” rough sleeper accommodation where practicable;
- (b) Serena Hall and the Mallards (or similar/alternatives) be adapted to provide interim day and night accommodation for British Rough Sleepers while we get them ready to be able to be placed in an AST;
- (c) A number of Council voids be made habitable (rather than lettable) to house European Nationals currently unable to demonstrate their right to public funds (NRPF – No Recourse to Public Funds); and
- (d) A Support Worker be funded by the Council to work, together with Voluntary Sector colleagues, to assist NRPF individuals in getting together the documents needed for them to demonstrate their right to public funds, which, once obtained allows us to assist them into ASTs and also into work so that they can become self sufficient.

8. Homeless Prevention Strategy

The Service Lead, Housing (People) Services introduced a report that provided an update on the Council’s Homelessness Prevention Strategy Action Plan and related homelessness matters.

In concluding the update, the Service Lead, Housing (People) Services invited comments and questions from the Panel.

During the course of the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Clarification was sought regarding the term ‘temporary accommodation’ and the average cost of providing this type of housing. It was explained that during 2019 the Council had overspent by approximately £1 million on temporary accommodation. This type of housing included bed and

breakfast provision, and room lets in houses in multiple occupation. Private lets were becoming increasingly expensive as landlords had begun asking for nightly rates rather than monthly rents. The Council was often unable to recoup the cost of temporary accommodation due to benefit caps not meeting the full cost of this provision. It was highlighted that temporary accommodation was a 'quick fix' and not a solution to the issue of homelessness.

- A Member asked what assistance the Council provided to those not eligible for housing support. It was explained that the Housing department did not provide any assistance to asylum seekers. For non UK citizens and those not eligible to receive benefits, the housing legislation was technical and complex; eligibility for assistance was determined by the circumstances of each case.
- It was queried if the Council had in place any 'reciprocal arrangements' with neighbouring local authorities. It was explained that due to the demand and cost of housing in London, it was unlikely that any London boroughs would be open to assisting the Council in this way. Some work had been undertaken with Reading and West Berkshire; however opportunities for this type of arrangement were limited.
- A Member noted that often people became homeless at the end of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy Agreement. It was asked if the Council provided any incentives to landlords to extend tenancy agreements. It was explained that the Council did offer some incentives to landlords; however, it was not sustainable to continually increase payments. Landlords often required the Council to cover the shortfall created by the Local Housing Allowance not meeting the cost of market rent.
- Referring to Appendix B of the report which set out the reasons for homelessness, it was noted that 51 cases had been categorised as 'other'. It was asked if more detailed information could be provided. It was explained that the categories were set by the Government for reporting purposes. The 'other' category included people who had been discharged from hospital or mental health facilities. It was agreed that additional details would be provided to the Panel.
- At the end of August the current restrictions preventing landlords from evicting tenants would be lifted. It was asked what action the Council was taking to mitigate an increase in homelessness. In response, it was explained that it was anticipated that the number of approaches would increase after August, however the Council expected to be able to meet the level of demand.

Resolved –

- (a) That the report be noted.

- (b) That further details relating to the homeless cases categorised as 'other' in Appendix B of the report be provided to the Panel.

9. Repairs Maintenance and Investment (RMI) Contract Update

The Service Lead, Housing Development and Contracts introduced an update report that detailed the performance of Osborne in the delivery of the Repairs Maintenance and Investment contract for the 2019/20 financial year, and April - May 2020.

The Chair invited comments and questions from the Panel.

During the course of the discussion, the following points were raised:

- In the report it was stated that Osborne had a 99% resident satisfaction rate; however a 'remedy notice' had been issued and performance deductions had been applied due to service failure during 2019/20. A Member queried this apparent contradiction and sought clarification regarding the conflicting information. It was explained that a specific critical failure remedy notice had been issued due to the performance of Osborne's contact centre. Osborne had disputed the validity of the notice and further work was being undertaken to review the relevant statistical information available. An independent auditor was reviewing the stated performance of Osborne and a contractor would be conducting a detailed quality assessment.
- With regard to the repairs backlog, it was queried if the terms of the contract enabled the Council to insist that additional resources be put in place to tackle the outstanding works. It was explained that Osborne had provided a Remobilisation Plan and had indicated that it would take four months' to clear the backlog of day-to-day repairs. As the contract administrator, the Service Lead, Housing Development and Contracts was able to withdraw or not issue major works or compliance contract works if Osborne failed to deliver. Osborne had been requested to dedicate additional resources to clearing the backlog. The capital programme contract would not be issued to them until the backlog work had been tackled. It was explained that the priority was to work with Osborne to address the outstanding works; however business contingency plans were being made to deliver the major programme should Osborne fail to carry out the required works. In light of the Grenfell Tower fire, the Government had issued legislation that the Council was currently working to fully implement. There was a lot of work in the pipeline that Osborne could have the opportunity to

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undertake, however if they failed to perform, future works could be allocated to other sub contractors. The Council was keen to employ local people and to date it was not felt that the local supply chain had been extensively utilised by Osborne.

- It was asked why Osborne's contact centre had failed to meet the performance target. It was explained that Osborne had failed to recruit sufficient staff to answer calls and this had led to a remedy notice being issued. Performance targets had now been put in place to ensure this issue did not reoccur.
- A Member highlighted that Osborne had been unable to retain staff due to pay being below the market rate. It was asked if this was still the case. It was explained that Osborne had successfully recruited to the vacant posts and further details could be provided by the Osborne representative at the September 2020 Panel meeting.
- The Chair suggested that it would be useful for Panel Members to attend a Neighbourhood Forum to speak with tenants and leaseholders directly and hear about their experience of Osborne's service delivery. The Co-opted Member agreed to send an invite to the Chair to the next Forum meeting. The Service Lead, Housing (People) Services reported that there were a number of Forums in place; however it would be beneficial to review the arrangements to promote better engagement with tenants and leaseholders and involve councillors.
- It was noted that Osborne had conducted a resident satisfaction survey, it was asked if the Council analysed or verified the results or carried out its own satisfaction survey. It was explained that an independent 'Star Survey' was carried out annually and the results of the survey were independently analysed. In addition, an independent evaluation of 10% of all compliance work was carried out and post inspection of critical works was undertaken. It was agreed that the 2018/19 Star Survey results be circulated to the Panel.

The Chair thanked the Service Lead, Housing Development and Contracts for the report and welcomed the opportunity to hear from an Osborne representative at the next Panel meeting.

Resolved –

- (a) That the report be noted.
- (b) That the Panel noted the requirement for Osborne to present the 2020/21 Annual Report to the Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel.

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- (c) That the Panel noted the requirement for Osborne to offer the Panel the outline of the program of service improvements, service innovations, and the intended outputs Osborne had agreed to commit to for delivery during the financial year 2020/21.
- (d) That the co-opted member Trevor Pollard be requested to forward an invite to a Resident Board meeting to the Chair and any other interested Panel Members.
- (e) That the Service Lead, Housing (People) Services be requested to re-circulate the Resident Satisfaction Survey, 2019, presented to the Panel in January 2020.

10. Neighbourhoods and Community Services Scrutiny Panel Work Programme 2020/21

Consideration was given to the list of proposed items for the next meeting.

It was reported that the approach to Key Worker Housing was being reviewed, and therefore it would be appropriate to scrutinise the Key Worker Housing Update report at a future meeting date.

In relation to the Repairs Maintenance and Investment Update report, it was agreed that Osborne's Interim Director be invited to attend the next meeting.

There was discussion about establishing a Rough Sleeper Task and Finish Group, and the Chair invited any Member wishing to be involved to contact her directly. It was requested that an officer from Housing Services be made available to support the task group.

Resolved –

- (a) That subject to the amendments detailed above, the Work Programme be agreed, as set out in Appendix A of the report.
- (b) That a Rough Sleeper Task and Finish Group be established.

11. Members' Attendance Record 2020/21

Resolved – That the details of the Members' Attendance record be noted.

12. Date of Next Meeting - 3rd September 2020

Resolved – That the date of the next meeting was confirmed as 3rd September 2020.

Chair

(Note: The meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 8.37 pm)