

Customer and Community Scrutiny Panel – Meeting held on Wednesday, 6th July, 2022.

Present:- Councillors Begum (Chair), Muvvala (Vice-Chair), Ali, Kaur, M. Malik, S. Malik, Mohammad and Trevor Pollard

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Ajaib and Hulme

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Brooker and Hussain

PART 1

1. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

2. Appointment of Chair & Vice Chair

Resolved – To note the appointment of Councillor Begum as Chair and Councillor Muvvala as Vice Chair of the Panel for the 2022-23 Municipal Year.

3. Minutes of the Meeting held on 6 April 2022

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 6 April 2022 be agreed as a correct record.

4. Member Questions

None received.

5. Houses of Multiple Occupation

The SBC Housing Regulation Manager provided a brief overview of the report entitled Houses of Multiple Occupation. She and the SBC AD, Place Regulation, responded to Members' questions and comments as set out below.

Why did the figures in the table on page 18 of the agenda, which set out the number of HMOs by ward, relate to 2018 only? Was there any data for the 2019-22 period?

Officers responded that this data was provided by the stock modelling exercise, which had been commissioned through consultants in 2018. The modelling had been carried out to ascertain whether the housing stock in Slough would fit the criteria for implementing the proposed licensing schemes. There were no methodologies to review the data annually and the modelling exercise would be revisited in the future if the current scheme was reviewed.

Had any fly tipping enforcement action been taken against HMOs?

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Fly tipping enforcement was not part of the housing team's remit. However, waste management regulations would be reviewed as part of the compliance audit of an HMO and any breaches of licensing conditions would be enforced.

Were properties inspected prior to the issue of an HMO license?

In the past, all proposed HMOs were inspected prior to issuing a license. However, this was no longer possible due to staff resourcing issues. Her team were committed to inspecting each property within five years of receipt of a licensing application. Inspections were also carried out following complaints, or where there was a history of non-compliance by landlords. This approach would ensure that resources were targeted at those HMOs which posed the greatest risk.

What was the basis for the predictions made as part of the modelling exercise?

The stock modelling exercise undertaken by consultants in 2018 had been based on large data set. She undertook to circulate the report setting out the methodology used for the projections. The consultants had acknowledged that the accuracy of the modelling exercise for HMOs was lower than that for private properties.

The Member stated that he would have preferred to see more accurate, recent figures included in the report. The figures provided were four years out of date. He asked what system was in place to ensure more realistic figures in the future and how officers would ensure that all HMOs were licensed.

The SBC Housing Regulation Manager advised that the consultants had relied on a wide variety of external data sources to make the projections. It should be noted that Council data sources were unreliable predictors of locations of HMOs. Officers depended on information from the public and other council departments to help identify unlicensed properties. Work relating to housing regulations was often reactive i.e. dealing with complaints. The licensing work had to be balanced against other workstreams. There were plans to recruit additional staff which would help ease the pressure. In future, she expected the modelling predictions to be more accurate as more data and intelligence would be available. It should be noted that this was a brand new initiative that would take a few years to bed in.

She added that the graph in the report related to the number of applications received for HMOs and not the number of licenses issued. The Housing team were actively working to identify any unlicensed properties. It was an offence to run an HMO without a license. In terms of modelling, trying to work out the tenure of properties was a time consuming, expensive and complex process requiring specific expertise to create the models and the algorithms and to buy in the data. It would therefore be costly to run this annually. The modelling had been carried out to ascertain whether there was a need for a licensing scheme and whether the conditions for implementing one had been

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met. The process for identifying unlicensed HMOs was often complex with the added challenge of some landlords not wanting to be regulated. The current scheme would expire in June 2024 and a new modelling exercise would be undertaken and be reported to Panel.

Following a question regarding the margin for error in the projections, an officer confirmed that the actual numbers of HMOs in operation may be lower than the predicted number.

A Member stated that she would like to see future stock modelling data. She asked if children were allowed in HMOs?

An officer responded that there were no restrictions on who could rent an HMO.

Who was the selected licensing scheme aimed at? Was its purpose to generate income or to protect tenants? Would the scheme be rolled out to other Wards?

The SBC Housing Regulation Manager advised that fees could only be set to administer the scheme, with the aim of improving the management of properties, and that under law, the Council was not permitted to make a profit from administering it. Legislation required that certain conditions be met before a selective licensing scheme could be introduced and must take account of the proportion of privately rented properties, levels of anti-social behaviour, inward migration, deprivation and crime in the area. The Council would need to be satisfied that the introduction of a selective licensing scheme would help tackle these issues. For example, 50% of the housing stock in Chalvey was privately rented – this figure was significantly higher than the national average. She added that to go above the current 20% threshold of privately rented stock or 20% of the geographical area would require an application to the Secretary of State.

The Member requested that the new enforcement policies being drafted should be circulated to Councillors for their feedback. The SBC AD, Place Regulation, responded that a workshop with Members could be arranged prior to the policies being submitted to scrutiny.

Had video calls to landlords been considered in cases where physical inspections were not possible?

Officers had not considered doing this en masse, however, landlords were often contacted by phone. Going forward, video calls would be considered for higher risks cases.

Were there any figures relating to the income generated from HMOs and selective licensing schemes? The SBC Housing Regulation Manager undertook to provide this information after the meeting. She added that any income received from the schemes was used to cover the cost of administering the scheme.

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Would the planned staff recruitment mean there would be additional enforcement officers?

The SBC Housing Regulation Manager advised the recruitment drive was intended to fill existing vacancies. Some staff in the team were currently acting up, (a process whereby an existing member of the team steps into higher grade post on a temporary basis) which not only provided a development opportunity for staff but was also an additional resource in the team.

Following a question, the SBC Housing Regulation Manager advised that a change of use would be required if there were seven or more occupants in an HMO. Any change of use would require planning permission and this work fell within the remit of the planning team.

The report stated that implementation of the scheme had put pressure on legal and support services. What were the timescales for implementation of the new policies and protocols?

SBC Housing Regulation Manager stated that the policies had been reviewed by HBLaw and all recommendations suggested by the legal team had been reviewed and implemented and an Eqia had also been undertaken. These policies and protocols could be submitted to the proposed Members' workshop.

The report stated that the Housing regulation team reserved formal sanctions for serious, persistent offenders. How were the lesser category of offenders dealt with?

All decisions regarding sanctions were made in line with the Council's general enforcement policy. Draft housing regulations and specific enforcement policies were being drafted. In the case of criminal sanctions, officers were obliged to take into account the evidence code for crown prosecutors. Each case was assessed on its merits with no predetermined sanctions. However, both civil and financial penalties, which were designed to be deterrents, could be issued. The revised protocol would allow the penalty bands to be more flexible, allowing lower sanctions for more trivial offences. A number of different enforcement tools such as issuing statutory notices, prohibition orders, etc could be used.

How did the team receive referrals?

The SBC Housing Regulation Manager advised that the figures relating to this had not yet been assessed. She undertook to provide this information after the meeting. She added that a significant number of referrals were received from council colleagues and partners, for example, from the planning enforcement team, GPs, social services, the fire service, local residents and estate agents.

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There was a correlation between poor housing and health. Should the Council alert all relevant partners to a referral method?

The Housing team tended to receive more referrals from social care, health and support services with regard to poor quality housing. The team was committed to tackling this issue within the resources available.

How was bulky waste disposal and fly tipping around the town dealt with?

This issue was not covered by the licensing scheme and fell within the remit of resilience team. This issue could be considered at a future scrutiny meeting.

Additional and selective licensing schemes were discretionary. The current scheme would expire at the end of June 2024, when it would be up for renewal. Mandatory licensing for larger HMOs lasted in perpetuity.

Many residents may not be aware of the need for HMO licensing. The Council should consider publicising this requirement through newsletters and social media in order to reach more landlords.

The SBC Housing Regulation Manager stated that the enforcement team would tend to give the benefit of the doubt before taking enforcement action against unlicensed landlords. A Facebook campaign had been carried out in 2021 with further communications planned in the near future.

Had officers considered checking on the Gumtree and Spare room websites for unlicensed HMOs?

SBC Housing Regulation Manager advised that on the whole, the landlords advertising on these sites tended to be compliant. Unlicensed HMOs were difficult to locate and there were RIPA (regulation of investigatory powers act) put up barriers to using certain types of information on websites.

Were there ward breakdowns of the number of selective licenses in each ward?

Selective licensing only covered Chalvey and Central districts. She undertook to provide figures regarding these after the meeting.

Many HMOs were poorly maintained. Did her team have any powers over poorly maintained properties?

The SBC Housing Regulation Manager stated that it was not always the case that privately rented housing stock was poorly maintained. Many poorly maintained properties may have owner occupiers or be in the social rented sector. However, poor management did have impact on the community. In the case of poor physical condition of a property for single occupancy properties, part 1 of the housing act covered hazards and safety, however, any issues related to the cosmetic appearance or the level of comfort in a

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property did not fall within its purview. In the case of refuse outside properties, this was not a licensing issue and would come within the remit of other teams, which could take the necessary enforcement action.

The report advised of 53 licences which had been revoked. Had any other action been taken against these landlords?

The SBC Housing Regulation Manager advised that licenses were not transferrable. The majority of those licenses had been revoked with the agreement of the license holder, for example, when a property had changed hands or the landlord had lawfully evicted the tenants. In some cases the landlord had been deemed not fit and proper and had failed to engage with the Council or appoint alternate managing agents.

In conclusion, the Chair highlighted some of the concerns set out in the report arising from HMOs, namely that poor housing conditions were linked to a host of negative consequences on the lives of residents. The implementation of the HMOs would need to be monitored effectively to ensure good quality, safe homes for residents, leading to improvements in the locality.

The Panel agreed that it would like to review HMOs and the selective licensing schemes in the Chalvey and Central areas at future sessions.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

6. Call Centre Statistics

The SBC Group Manager for Customer Support presented the report on Call Centre Statistics.

Members asked the questions below and received the following responses.

With regard to customer service improvement, would it be possible to allocate an operative to deal with customers at Observatory House for a few hours per day? How many residents were using CAPS (customer access points) at each of the hubs?

The SBC Group Manager advised that there were a number of customer access points at the hubs where residents could make appointments. Observatory House had been designated for staff use only and could not be used to locate CAPS.

The SBC Customer Service Operational Lead replied that in each locality there was one full time member of staff working from Monday to Friday, dealing with approximately five hundred appointments per month. Scanning devices would be installed at the hubs which would enable customers to submit their documents more easily, thereby saving time.

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How was the Council improving its communications with residents? The Member suggested that an email newsletter, containing all relevant information and updates for residents should be explored.

The SBC Group Manager stated that a working group was being set up as part of the customer engagement strategy to assess the best way to engage with residents, whether through focus groups or surveys aimed at improving customer satisfaction and customer experience. The suggestion of an email newsletter would be explored further with the Communications team.

The figures in the report showed that the call centre response rate and wait times had not improved. What was the appointments system at the hubs? If online, then how many residents had access to online bookings? Which areas of the service had seen improvement and which areas required further improvement?

The SBC Group Manager advised that there was an online appointment booking system. Residents had access to the public computers at some of the hubs and library staff were on hand to help residents make appointments. Depending on staff availability, some customers would be able to get appointments the same day.

Landmark Place used to have approximately 36,000 face to face appointments annually. Were the new hubs aiming to reach same level of appointments, and if so, how?

The SBC Customer Service Operational Lead advised that the number of residents attending Landmark Place had become unmanageable. In closing Landmark place, the Council's strategy had been to ensure channel shift among residents, however, there was still work to be done to encourage channel shift among residents.

A Member stated that a number of residents had complained to him about not being able to contact the Council, some of whom were attempting to pay their council tax or parking fines.

Officers advised that on phoning the contact centre, callers were given the option to connect to an automated payment line and that the call centre did not deal with parking fines, this function had been outsourced to an external parking team.

The SBC Customer Service Operational Lead added that not all frontline services were dealt with by customer services. Communications between back office teams and customers was key. Many back office services had moved to digital channels,

Had it been a wise decision to remove 18 call centre staff in 2020 as part of transformation initiative only to appoint 18 new staff in 2022 on a temporary basis? What improvements were planned for the service?

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The SBC Director of Finance advised that this had been a consequence of the 'Our Futures' programme, the introduction of subsequent budget reductions and the fact that digitisation did not take place as planned. This situation needed to be addressed. Planned improvements would be part of the budget process and submitted to Members for agreement. The task of digitisation would take some time to complete.

How would the Customer engagement strategy obtain necessary insights from residents and councillors to inform future service delivery?

The SBC Group Manager stated that the proposed working group would consider this with input from all relevant council teams.

If progress was made, how would this be fed-back to Councillors and residents?

The SBC Group Manager stated that once the customer engagement strategy was in place a report would be shared with the Corporate Leadership Team, possibly Cabinet and any residents who had engaged with the Council regarding the matter.

How would the Council engage with digitally excluded residents?

The working group would be considering this. Other means of engaging with digitally excluded residents would be explored.

Why didn't council staff use teams messaging among themselves or to deal with queries from the public? How could digitally excluded residents receive the council tax rebate?

The SBC Customer Service Operational lead stated that the customer service team used a different telephone platform and could not easily take teams calls. Council staff all used outlook email for daily communication.

He added that residents could book appointments at the CAPs and staff there would help them to complete online forms. Staff at the contact centre could also assist callers with this.

Following a question about the council tax rebate, the Director of Finance advised the rebate would be credited to residents in the 2022-23 financial year.

What were the busiest periods for the call centre? Did all 18 of the temporary recruits need work at the call centre on a full time basis?

The SBC Customer Service Operational lead advised that the busiest periods were mornings from 9 am and lunchtimes. The call centre was open till 5pm. Staff at the call centre dealt with eighteen separate service areas, undertook training, dealt with email enquiries and processed blue badge applications.

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What developments had been made to date with the new Customer Engagement Strategy?

The SBC Group Manager stated that work on the strategy was ongoing and that the working group would be a key driver in this. Engagement with stakeholders and customers would inform and define the strategy.

What consideration would be given to disabled residents or those with additional needs and how would they be communicated with?

The SBC Group Manager stated that the use of technology such as hearing loops and working closely with the Council's equalities officer would help to ensure that services were accessible. Other options included face to face appointments, conference calls and updating the IT system so it would flag up vulnerable customers.

The report showed that call duration times had increased, causing further delays - what was being done to address this?

The SBC Customer Service Operational lead advised that additional staff training, staff mentoring and coaching for the temporary members of staff to gain confidence, not using the call hold mechanism would help reduce transaction times.

What was entailed in the review process?

The SBC Group Manager stated that the review process would evaluate the customer journey, e.g. how did customers contact the Council, what contact information was available on the Council's website, the quality of the service used and that digital processes were as simple as possible for residents.

Did the CAPs see as many customers as Landmark place?

The SBC Customer Service Operational lead stated that the closure of Landmark place had been a political decision, agreed by Council and currently fewer customers were being seen.

A Member stated that she had not found an Eqia for the 'our futures' programme. Would an Eqia be undertaken prior to channel shift? She was concerned that digitally excluded, vulnerable residents would not receive the necessary support. When would a report regarding resident engagement plan be submitted to Members? She understood that there was a one to two week waiting time at Britwell for face to face appointments. How long was it taking to process housing benefit claims?

The SBC Customer Service Operational lead stated that the CAP at Britwell was quite busy and waiting times for appointments could be between 2-4 weeks. The hub had moved to an appointment based system as there was only one member of staff there.

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The Director of Finance confirmed that Eqias would be undertaken for all future budget proposals and staff had received the necessary training to carry out Eqias. The engagement plans would be shared with Cabinet and scrutiny in the near future.

How many residents had signed up to the self-service portals?

The SBC Customer Service Operational lead stated that his team did not deal with housing benefit claims and he did not have information regarding the self-service portals. The Director of Finance undertook to provide a response to the above queries after the meeting.

What were the most common queries dealt with by the contact centre? These should be analysed in a bid to reduce call volumes. He had received a number of complaints regarding the call centre.

The SBC Customer Service Operational lead stated that six service areas were in high demand. The CRM reporting mechanism, could track the most frequently asked questions by customers and that this intelligence and data would help inform future improvements.

He added that many residents phoned the call centre following receipt of council communications. These residents were not phoning to complain but to make enquiries. Complaints were dealt with under a different mechanism.

How many calls were received for each service area?

The Director of Finance directed the Member to the forthcoming finance action plan report, which would be submitted to Cabinet, which would provide the information requested.

Which Wards were most calls received from?

The SBC Customer Service Operational lead advised that the service did not currently gather demographic data.

In summary, the Chair noted that the call centre currently received fewer calls than in 2020 and 2021. Nevertheless, it was reassuring that there had been some improvements and that the whole customer experience would be factored into the improvement plan. Priority should be given to the needs of vulnerable customers. Members looked forward to crucial remodelling of the service area and a more efficient, effective and adequate service in the future.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

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7. Date of Next Meeting

7 September 2022.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.36 pm and closed at 8.44 pm)

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