

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
24th July, 2013

Present:- Councillor Falvey (in the Chair); Councillors Andrews, Astbury, Atkin, Dodson, Ellis, Gilding, Godfrey, N. Hamilton, Jepson, Johnston, Pickering, Read, Roche, Sims, Swift, Vines, Wallis and Whysall; together with co-opted members Mrs. P. Copnell and Mr. B. Walker.

Apologies for absence were received from The Mayor (Councillor Foden) and from Councillors Gosling and P. A. Russell.

7. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

All Members and co-opted members of the Improving Places Select Commission, present at this meeting, declared their personal interests in item 11 below (Revision of RMBC's Council Housing Allocations Policy) because they are either (i) Council housing tenants themselves; or (ii) a relative of a Council housing tenant; or (iii) may have a close association with someone who is a Council housing tenant, or an applicant for a tenancy.

8. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

There were no questions from members of the public or the press.

9. COMMUNICATIONS

There were no items to report.

10. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING OF THE IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION HELD ON 19TH JUNE, 2013

Resolved:- That the minutes of the previous meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission, held on 19th June, 2013, be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chairman.

11. REVISION OF RMBC'S COUNCIL HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY

Further to minutes of previous meetings of the Improving Places Select Commission (Minute No. 33(3) of the meeting held on 17th October, 2012 and Minute No. 52 of the meeting held on 27th March, 2013), consideration was given to a report presented by the Sandra Tolley (Housing Options Manager) and Sandra Wardle (Housing Advice Manager) concerning this Council's Housing Allocations Policy, which was last substantially amended in January 2010. The report stated that this Policy needs to be revised again to take into account the new flexibilities and opportunities offered to social housing landlords by the Localism Act 2011, and to make the system as fair as possible. There is also the need to review the Housing Allocations Policy because of the size of the

Housing Register, the likelihood that the Register will increase if no action is taken and to take account of the circumstances of local people and firmly base the Housing Allocations Policy on addressing housing need.

Feedback from Elected Members, about the proposed revisions to the Housing Allocations Policy, will be incorporated into the final version of the Policy, which will be submitted to the Cabinet and to the Council meeting for formal adoption during November, 2013.

The Select Commission noted that the Localism Act 2011 seeks to devolve responsibility back to local authorities, allowing more decisions about housing to be taken locally. In the case of allocating housing, this means local authority landlords are able to apply locally determined criteria to their housing registers and no longer have to operate open registers, with the expectation from central Government that social housing should be offered to those people in housing need.

This Council's Housing Register currently contains more than 25,000 applicants, the vast majority of whom are adequately housed, placed in the General group and do not currently need a Council house, although they may aspire to live in a Council home in the future. The submitted report listed the main problems caused by the current policy.

The report, the presentation and the Select Commission's subsequent debate included the following salient issues:-

: consultation timetable, which began during the Autumn 2012 and leads to the eventual implementation of the revised Housing Allocations Policy, after approval by the Council, during December 2013;

: the impact of the increasing demand for housing, as well as housing provision for people who are in greater need;

: costs of administration of a register containing 25,000 households;

: relevant legislation – Housing Act 1996 (Part VI); Homelessness Act 2002; Localism Act 2011;

: the Council's 'Fair and Flexible Policy' for the allocation of Council housing, to the people most in need;

: statistical details of the Council Housing Register of applicants for tenancies;

: the definition of people who are adequately housed;

: housing allocations policies (and numbers of people on the housing register) of neighbouring and nearby local authorities (a summary of benchmarked data was appended to the report);

- : allocation of housing to people who have served in the Armed Forces;
- : the 'downsizing rules' and the effects of the coalition Government's welfare reforms;
- : the implications for people who are already owner-occupiers and applicants who do not live in the Rotherham Borough area;
- : options for cancelling applications, for example if an applicant refuses the offer of a housing tenancy;
- : discussion about the 'General Waiting List' of applicants for housing; the advertising of vacant properties for letting and the difficulties posed by hard-to-let properties;
- : the policy of some local authorities requiring applicants to live within the same local authority area for a number of years before an application for a Council housing tenancy will be accepted;
- : dealing with the most urgent, emergency cases of housing need;
- : the priority category for young people leaving the care of the local authority;
- : ways of informing the general public about changes to the Housing Allocations Policy;
- : the categorisation of people living in 'tied accommodation', eg: school caretakers;
- : the categorisation of people who are bereaved and people from broken family relationships.

Members were provided with a questionnaire to complete during the meeting, containing optional proposals for the definitions of Housing Need Groups to be included within the future Housing Allocations Policy.

Resolved:- (1) That the report be received and its contents noted.

(2) That the Improving Places Select Commission expresses the following views with regard to the proposed revisions to this Council's Housing Allocations Policy:-

(a) to change the Housing Register so that applicants are listed in the "Register of Housing Need", but that there shall no longer be a "General Waiting List";

(b) to create three new groups/categories applicable to the Register of Housing Need; and that Housing Officers shall report further on the proposed titles for these three groups/categories;

- (c) the Select Commission does not agree with any proposed increase in the percentage of properties to be advertised to applicants; instead the Select Commission suggests that 100% of vacant properties are to be advertised to people in the most urgent need of housing and 50% of properties shall be advertised equally to applicants placed within the other two groups/categories;
- (d) after the initial mail-out, there shall be no further annual reviews of the Housing Register, as the resources spent on this costly administration are better deployed on providing advice services to people about the full range of housing options in Rotherham;
- (e) all applicants for Council housing tenancies must have lived within the Rotherham Borough area for a minimum period of three years consecutively;
- (f) the new housing downsizing rules shall be added to the highest priority group/category of Housing need;
- (g) applicants needing to move house for reasons relating to employment in the Rotherham Borough area shall be added to the second priority group/category of Housing need and must have lived in the Rotherham Borough area for a minimum period of three years consecutively;
- (h) applicants who are currently bidding, living with family, friends or dependants and who are ready to live independently but cannot afford other housing options, such as private rented or owner occupation, shall be added to the third priority group/category of Housing need;
- (i) Housing Officers shall examine the most appropriate way of considering and categorising applicants for housing tenancies from Armed Forces personnel, both in the light of this Council's Armed Forces covenant and in accordance with provisions of the Localism Act 2011;
- (j) to make the following changes to policy and procedures in order to manage more effectively the Housing Register and encourage behaviour change:-
- (i) once a person has refused two offers, their application shall be cancelled;
- (ii) once a person has decided and agreed to have major adaptations work that meet their long-term needs, their re-housing application should be cancelled;
- (iii) once an application has been cancelled for any reason, such as re-housing and evictions, the applicant should not be allowed to re-join the Housing Register until after a period of twelve months has elapsed;

(iv) once a homeless applicant refuses a suitable offer of accommodation (Council, Registered Social Landlord or private rented sector) the homeless applicant will be moved down from the second group/category to the third group/category of Housing need; furthermore, on acceptance of a private rented sector offer, their application should be cancelled.

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12. ITEMS DEFERRED UNTIL THE NEXT MEETING

In view of the time spent upon consideration of item 11 above, the following agenda items were deferred until the next meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission, to be held on Wednesday, 4th September, 2013:-

- : Planning Obligations – updated Section 106 Accounts information
- : Developer contributions for open spaces
- : Community Infrastructure Levy viability and infrastructure study
- : school place planning