

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
30th November, 2016**

Present:- Councillor Mallinder (in the Chair); Councillors Allen, Atkin, Buckley, Jepson, McNeely, Price, Reeder, Rushforth, Taylor, Julie Turner, Walsh and Wyatt.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cutts, Jones, Marles, Sheppard, B. Walker and Whysall.

33. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following persons declared their personal interests in Minute No. 37 (Housing Allocation Policy Amendments), as they are existing tenants of Council housing: Councillor McNeely and co-opted members Mrs. L. Shears and Mr. P. Cahill.

34. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

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

35. COMMUNICATIONS

The following items were discussed:-

(a) Members of this Select Commission were thanked for their attendance at the performance management training session.

(b) the Council's Corporate Plan – this will be an item included on the agenda of this Select Commission's next meeting, scheduled to be held on Wednesday, 11th January, 2017;

(c) Pre-meetings/briefings in advance of meetings of the Improving Places Select Commission – it was agreed that these informal briefings will continue to take place on the same day as the full meeting of this Select Commission, although a longer period of time will be allocated to them.

36. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 26TH OCTOBER, 2016

Resolved:- That the minutes of the previous meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission, held on 26th October, 2016, be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chairman.

37. HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY AMENDMENTS

Further to Minute No. 11 of the meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission held on 24th July, 2013, consideration was given to a report of the Strategic Director of Adult Care and Housing stating that, on 6th August, 2015, a revised Housing Allocation Policy had been implemented

by the Council. However, one of the proposals regarding Council Tax arrears was deferred due to representations made after the publication of the Commissioners' 'minded to agree' decision on 6th August, 2015. Further analysis and exploration of the legal implications was required and a clear procedure would have to be developed if Council Tax arrears could be taken into account in deciding whether an applicant is eligible to join the Housing Register. This analysis has now been completed and the purpose of the submitted report is to update Elected Members about the findings. Due to the legal advice given on this issue, it is no longer being recommended that Council Tax debt be included in the Allocations Policy.

At the same time, six amendments are recommended which aim to increase Housing tenancy sustainability, take into account lessons learned during the past twelve months (2015/16), changes brought about by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 and to prepare for the Homelessness Reduction Bill.

The Select Commission received a presentation from Mrs. Sandra Tolley and Mrs. Sandra Wardle (Housing Services) about the Council's review of the Housing Allocations Policy. The presentation highlighted the following salient issues:-

- Housing Allocations Policy – the review timetable
- Proposals for further amendment (a report is to be submitted to the meeting of the Cabinet and Commissioners during February 2017);
- Council Tax – tenancy-related debts are relevant to the Housing Allocations Policy, therefore the recommendation relating to Council Tax arrears will not be included in the Policy
- The six proposed amendments to the Policy:

Tenancy Sustainability – Recommendations

1. The mandatory requirement for applicants who have no experience of running their own home, or where a previous tenancy has failed, to attend a pre-tenancy workshop.
2. The mandatory requirement for all applicants to undertake a housing options interview before joining the housing register

Reduction in spend – Recommendation

3. New tenants should not be allowed to apply to transfer within the first two years of their tenancy.

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Reduction in spend – Recommendation

4. No rent allowances are issued to new tenants or existing Council tenants. Recommended option

Option 1: Reduce the fourteen days' allowance to seven days (lowest amount of budget savings achieved)

Option 2: Reduce the fourteen days' allowance to a maximum of five working days.

Option 3: No rent allowances are issued (higher level of budget savings achieved)

Housing Options (Under age 35) Recommendations:

5. Bedsits are let to single people or couples giving preference to single people under the age of 35 years:

Option 1 – No change

Option 2 - Priority to single persons aged under 35 years

6. Include homeless applicants owed a reasonable preference to the list of applicants who are exempt from the Local Connection Criteria rules.

- Homeless, but not in priority need
- Homeless, but owed a duty by another authority
- Living in unfit or unsatisfactory housing, have a medical or disability or pressing welfare reason to move.

- Impact of the forthcoming Homelessness Prevention Bill;
- Brief details of the consultation process on the amendments to the Housing Allocation Policy.

The Members of the Select Commission raised the following matters during debate:-

(a) an explanation was provided of the different housing bands (criteria of the Housing Waiting List);

(b) the need for flexibility in relation to the rent allowances for tenants, reflecting the condition of some properties which are being let; contract arrangements are in place with regard to the interior and exterior decorating of some properties; the 'lettable standard' of properties;

(c) the allowance of two weeks, without payment of rent, in respect of the death of existing tenants (Members requested further information about this matter);

(d) pre-tenancy workshops and ensuring that tenants are fully informed of this process; it was noted that the system is to be used by many housing authorities and that every endeavour will be made to learn from and implement the best practice available; specific workshops are available

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from several providers (eg: Mears); it was noted that prospective tenants are required to attend the workshops, although the courses do not require participants to take an examination or test; (a customer/tenant dvd training film is available to view);

(e) consideration of applications for tenancies from customers who are homeless – the Policy recommends that a reasonable preference is given to people who are homeless;

(f) Tenancy sustainability and the use of fixed-term tenancies – Government legislation insists upon the use of fixed-term tenancies;

(g) Transfer of tenancies – 10% of properties are currently advertised for tenants wishing to transfer properties; this amount could be reduced to 5%;

(h) reasons for termination of housing tenancies – there are many and varied reasons why tenants choose to terminate their tenancies (Members requested further details of the statistics included within the submitted report);

(i) the role of the Income Team is being reviewed and will be completed in the early months of 2017;

(j) action taken against tenants in breach of conditions – various interviews and checks are undertaken, as well as pre-tenancy inspections;

(k) it is probable that the Policy will be considered by the Cabinet and Commissioners at a meeting to be held during February 2017;

(l) options available for tenants under the age of 35 years – accommodation of a suitable size; possible use of shared tenancies which will be cheaper for the individual;

(m) the Policy intends to focus upon the housing requirements of those tenants most in need;

(n) the Key Choices website includes some background information about the local area in which a property available for rent is situated; this useful information will also be discussed in the interviews with prospective tenants;

(o) information about the process relating to void properties, to try and ensure that empty properties are available for letting as soon as possible;

(p) the timetable for this Policy review – ensuring that the necessary consultation takes place and that the review is comprehensive; the Policy has to be reviewed regularly in response to any changes in Government legislation.

The officers were thanked for their informative presentation.

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

(2) That the Improving Places Select Commission supports the implementation of the proposed six amendments to the Housing Allocation Policy, as set out below and as detailed within the submitted report:-

(i) Mandatory requirement for applicants who have no experience of running their own home, or where a previous tenancy has failed, to attend a pre-tenancy workshop.

(ii) Mandatory requirement for all applicants to undertake a housing options interview before joining the housing register.

(iii) New tenants should not be allowed to apply to transfer within the first two years of their tenancy.

(iv) No rent allowances are issued to new tenants or existing Council tenants.

(v) Bedsits are let to single people or couples, giving preference to single people under the age of 35 years.

(vi) Include homeless applicants owed a reasonable preference to the list of applicants who are exempt from the Local Connection Criteria rules.

(3) That a progress report be submitted to a future meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission, during 2017 and such report shall include details of:-

- further information about the allowance of two weeks, without payment of rent, in respect of the death of existing housing tenants;

- Elected Members (Scrutiny) are to be involved in the development of the workshops and in the eventual reporting on the effectiveness of the pre-tenancy workshops and the mandatory training for prospective tenants of Council housing.

(Councillor McNeely and co-opted members Mrs. L. Shears and Mr. P. Cahill declared their personal interests in the above item as they are existing tenants of Council housing)

38. DIGNITY/ROTHERHAM MBC CONTRACT PERFORMANCE UPDATE

Further to Minute No. 18 of the meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission held on 14th September, 2016, consideration was given to a report presented by the Assistant Director – Community Safety and Street

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Scene, stating that on 1st August, 2008, the Council had entered into a 35 years' contractual agreement with Dignity Funerals Ltd. for the provision of bereavement services to the people of Rotherham. This unique partnership led to the transfer of significant risks from the Council to Dignity Funerals Ltd., with the Company taking on the responsibility for the capital works and maintenance of the East Herringthorpe Cemetery and Crematorium, together with the maintenance of the eight other Municipal Cemeteries located throughout the Rotherham Borough area. The Council retained the risk in relation to cemetery chapels, associated buildings and boundary walls on some cemetery sites. Dignity Funerals Ltd. had sub-contracted the grounds maintenance elements of the service to Glendale Countryside Management Ltd (but Dignity Funerals Ltd. had retained the overall responsibility for the delivery of the service). The following salient issues were highlighted:-

- the 35 years' contract produces annual incomes for the Council, with the amounts being linked to inflation;
- the requirement for crematoria to comply with mercury abatement legislation and new environmental legislation;
- improvements to the East Herringthorpe crematorium facility; proposed extension to the car park;
- possible availability of land for extensions to the existing municipal cemeteries around the Borough area;
- ensuring that progress reports are available about the cemeteries and crematorium service and that an annual report is provided by the Dignity Funerals Limited company;
- hours of opening of the facilities and the time available for burials (a review of this issues is continuing, including the specific requirements of Muslim burials);
- use of kerb sets and borders around grave spaces, which are not always suitable for cemeteries designed and operating as lawn cemeteries (eg; Greasbrough Lane at Rawmarsh);
- the Dignity Funerals Ltd. company establishes its own level of service pricing, which are lower in comparison to other local authorities regionally; further bench-marking would be undertake in respect of this issue;
- the cost of memorial benches and the availability of benches made from different materials; the review of pricing of such benches.

The Members of the Select Commission raised the following issues during debate:-

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- (a) the significant investment which Dignity Funerals Ltd. have made in the Est Herringthorpe Crematorium and the possible investment elsewhere in the other cemeteries around the Rotherham Borough area;
- (b) Cemetery Chapels – the costs to the Borough Council of the continuing and future maintenance of these Victorian Chapels and whether the establishment of ‘friends’ groups would be feasible;
- (c) the benefits of establishing a Bereavement Services Forum involving representatives of the Local Authority, Dignity Funerals Ltd., funeral directors and the local clergy;
- (d) dog fouling in cemeteries and the use of Environmental Enforcement and Penalty Notices;
- (e) the balcony area at the East Herringthorpe Crematorium and the need for structural repairs;
- (f) the costs of maintenance of closed cemeteries which have no available space for further burials;
- (g) improvements to footpaths and roadways within cemeteries – further details will be reported at a future meeting;
- (h) further monitoring of the performance of Glendale Countryside Management Ltd., in respect of grounds maintenance at the Maltby cemetery;
- (i) details were required of the timescale for the repair of the boundary wall at the Greasbrough Lane cemetery at Rawmarsh.

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

(2) That a further progress report be submitted to a future meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission, such report to include the following information relating to the cemeteries and crematorium service:-

- monitoring of the performance of Glendale Countryside Management Ltd., in respect of grounds maintenance at the Maltby cemetery;
- the various options available in respect of the provision of memorial benches within cemeteries (including a pricing structure);
- the fees and charges for the cemeteries and crematorium service – benchmarking and comparison against other local authorities, both regionally and similar local authorities throughout the country;

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- further consideration of the opening hours of cemeteries and crematorium and the hours available for burials (including the requirements in respect of Muslim burials);
- an update in respect of the availability of land for a possible extension to the Maltby cemetery.

39. EMERGENCY PLANNING TASK AND FINISH GROUP

Further to Minute No. 31 of the meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission held on 26th October, 2016, Councillor Wyatt (Chair of the Task and Finish Group) provided the following progress and update details:-

- it was still the intention to complete this scrutiny review of Emergency Planning by April 2017;
- the review will include assessment of the duties of the Emergency Planning Forward Liaison Officers and of the Borough Co-ordinator of the Emergency Plan, with this assessment taking place at the time these officials are on-call, as required by the Emergency Plan;
- the review will include the testing of the resilience of the Emergency Plan, in a simulated emergency exercise, with a full evaluation after completion of the exercise;
- Members of the Task and Finish Group have visited the Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, where a shared service arrangement exists for Emergency Planning, involving four local authorities; Members had been able to participate in a workshop about community resilience and community involvement;
- the scrutiny review will also examine the effectiveness of communications and the use of social media;
- it was also the intention to invite Parish Councils to a workshop for discussion of the effectiveness of the various Parish resilience plans (it was agreed that the appropriate Ward Councillors should be invited to attend this workshop).

The Select Commission thanked Councillor Wyatt and the Task and Finish Group for their continuing scrutiny work on this issue.

40. TENANT SCRUTINY

Co-opted member Mrs. L. Shears reported on the following matters:-

- Rotherfed representatives had attended the Young Tenants Conference at Trafford House on Tuesday, 15th November, 2016;

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- research is being undertaken into the best practice in other local authorities with regard to tenant involvement, especially younger tenants;
- Rotherfed is undertaking another survey into ways of communicating and engaging with younger tenants (16 to 35 years age range) – copies of the survey document were provided for Elected Members;
- representatives of RUSH House had been invited to assist with the Rotherfed telephone help-line for tenants;
- concern has been expressed about the proposed reduction in the number of beds provided by RUSH House.

Resolved:- That the information be noted.