

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 21 March 2023**

Present:- Councillor Wyatt (in the Chair); Councillors Browne, C Carter, Castledine-Dack, T. Collingham, Cowen, Ellis, Havard, Jones, McNeely, Monk, Taylor and Tinsley. Also present were co-opted members Ms. K. Bacon and Ms. M Jacques.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bacon and Bennett-Sylvester.

The webcast of the Council Meeting can be viewed at:-

<https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

57. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 7 FEBRUARY 2023

Resolved:-

- 1) That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 7 February 2023 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

58. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

As a tenant of the Council, Cllr McNeely declared a personal interest in respect of agenda items 6 and 7.

59. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

The Chair advised that there were no members of the public or representatives of media organisations present at the meeting and there were no questions in respect of matters on the agenda.

60. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Chair advised that there was no reason to exclude members of the press or public from observing any items on the agenda.

61. TENANTS SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL - IMPROVING COMMUNICATION WITH TENANTS

Consideration was given to a report providing a summary of the findings of the review of communications with tenants and the associated action plan. The findings and recommendations were summarised by the Chief Executive Officer of Rotherham Federation of Communities. The review had been conducted by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel, a key component of the Council's Tenant Engagement Framework. The Tenant Scrutiny Panel tenants to scrutinise landlord services and standards with the aim of improving performance, value for money and tenant satisfaction. The Panel is facilitated by Rotherham Federation of Communities (Rotherfed) on behalf of the Council and consists of tenant and resident representatives from across the Borough. The Panel had completed the

review of how the Council communicates with tenants, with reference to the requirements within the Social Housing White Paper. Following completion of the Tenant Scrutiny Review, the report and recommendations had been discussed with the Housing Service and other relevant council services, and an action plan had been agreed to support delivery of the recommendations. The Assistant Director of Housing expressed gratitude to the Panel for their work.

In discussion, the Chair thanked the Panel and noted the importance of communications and the impact on residents if communications are not done well. The Chair noted the recommendations contained within the report apply more widely throughout the Council's communications. The CEO of Rotherfed affirmed the importance of the plain language and the barriers that are created by use of jargon and acronyms. The CEO of Rotherfed also noted the strength of feeling in support of staff training. Timescales for progress in the implementation of the action plan would also be relevant, because it was not possible to implement every change at once. Sensitivity around bereavement, for example, was noted by the CEO of Rotherfed as one of the primary takeaways.

Members expressed gratitude for the high quality of the review content and the recommendations. Members acknowledged that the six-minute target represents an industry average, but it was felt that this was not good enough. The response from the Assistant Director of Housing described current work on customer experience to get call times down. There was consideration of coordinating generalist versus specialist expertise in answering calls to help reduce call times.

Members emphasised social media as a further area for development, and ensuring information was provided in a way that was easy for people to access. The response from the Assistant Director of Housing noted discussions around production of the Home Matters newsletter in a variety of formats. As part of the Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSMs) the Service also had a goal to collect survey data from tenants using standardised national questions. This data would provide insights regarding preferences of tenants. It was confirmed that there was a corporate RMBC social media page, although there was no specific page for Housing. Many organisations make more use of social media. The Service could explore how this could be expanded. Ward Housing Hubs Capital Investment schemes within the wards were also noted as a channel for getting messages out to tenants which would be reviewed. The Housing Operations Manager described the prioritisation process by which tenant communications letters are reviewed. The Assistant Director of Housing noted that the Service does work with "Tell us Once." This does work; however, the information can become lost within the multiple areas of the Service. It was noted that there were only a few cases where this occurs, but it was acknowledged that these few have a high impact.

Members requested more information around communications associated with District Heating and rents. The response from the Assistant Director of Housing noted the conversations with ward members who have District Heating in their wards. It was acknowledged that communications could be improved. The circumstances around the District Heating communications were summarised, including a decision taken late relative to other years, which resulted in the letters being sent later. The short timescales meant there was not the chance to put supportive language around the communication. The Service had scheduled drop-in sessions and there would be additional communications for those on prepayment meters.

More information was requested around the feasibility of reinstating a dedicated call centre for Housing. The response from officers noted that the Council did previously have a Housing call centre. The current system allowed for general as well as technical inquiries and it was felt that the best of both worlds was being achieved. Assurances were given that triage for safety was being done, and there were technical officers available.

Members requested more information around how tenant responsibilities and rights have evolved over recent years, and whether changes of this kind could be made clear. The response from the Housing Operations Manager noted the last update was several years ago, and acknowledged that this is something that tenants should have clear communications around. This point would be taken on board for implementation when there are future changes.

Members noted that the Housing officer may not be known to many tenants; therefore, Members sought information around how this might be more widely publicised. The response from the Housing Operations Manager noted some wards where there are many properties, there may be three officers. It was acknowledged that this would be something that would be relevant to communicate to tenants and would be considered. One way to do this would be through the newsletters. The Chair noted the need to look at the readership of the newsletter, and ensuring there are multiple formats with a view to promoting readership.

Members requested further details around feedback on Key Choices. The response from the Assistant Director of Housing noted that the number of calls had gone up hugely over the last years. More people were struggling; meanwhile, the service was still recovering from a difficult period during COVID-19. The Service had a number of staff having left, and the Service found it harder to recruit. The average was still 10-15 minutes which was too high but was being addressed. It was hoped to see positive change following the new staff coming in.

Members requested assurances around the effectiveness of the case notes system. The response from officers noted that the Service used to have several systems across housing. Now, these systems are joined to

allow unified approach across services. IT was working with the Service on this transition. Assurances were provided that these systems were in place and would be embedded and publicised.

Members requested further clarification around the timescales for implementation. The response from the Housing Operations Manager noted that the actions on the recommendations went up to September 2023, with customer experience board work extending through 2024. It was noted that the Service would be in a position to provide a full update on the progress with the implementation of the action plan in 12 months.

The CEO of Rotherfed noted that the kind words are passed on to the Panel who did the review. The CEO of Rotherfed expressed thanks to the officers who take part in the scrutiny. It was noted that the review received a good response from officers who take the review very seriously. Officers demonstrate this by coming back to the panel well prepared. This is very valued. It was noted that the Housing Operations Manager was scheduled to update the Panel in August 2023. The Panel would continue to receive periodic updates until the Panel were content that everything had been taken to its natural conclusion.

Resolved:-

- 1) That the report and action plan be noted.
- 2) That feedback of Members in regard to the improvement of communications, including the website and newsletter, be noted.
- 3) That scrutiny be invited to comment on the communications strategy at an appropriate point in 2024.

62. HOUSING STRATEGY 2022-25 PROGRESS REPORT Q2/Q3

Consideration was given to a report presented for information which provided an update on progress in implementation of the Housing Strategy over the period July to December 2022 (Q2/Q3). The Strategy recognises the key issues affecting housing in Rotherham and the impact these have on residents. The Strategy also sets out how the Council will work in partnership to address the issues identified. The report presented an update on each of the six key priorities comprising the Strategy:

- High quality new homes
- Affordable homes to meet local need
- Investment in existing homes
- Bringing empty homes back into use
- Supporting people to live independently
- Strengthening communities

The Assistant Director of Housing noted that the context had changed significantly since the Strategy was agreed, and challenges were

summarised. Progress on Housing Development was emphasised, including examples of how the Council is innovating to deliver 1000 new homes by 2026.

In discussion, Members noted the number of one-bedroom bungalows built in the 1950s which do not have room for modern living, including space to have visitors, meals, hobbies, medical equipment, modern appliances and technology. If there could be a programme for extending those, this would be welcome.

Members requested further assurances that investment in existing homes would be done proactively instead of reactively. The response from officers noted that in some parts of the borough, the Service is carrying out proactive investment. In Maltby the Service is working to get 140 houses to net zero, replacing some structural elements to do that. The issue was the cost, with difficult choices for the Council to make to achieve a balance between proactive, reactive, and growth initiatives. The Service was doing a lot of work around damp and mould, looking at ways to prevent it before people experience this. There were trade-offs around choices.

Members requested further details around the empty homes being brought back into use. The response from officers noted this was something the Service had recently started up again. An empty homes event had generated leads. Often the Service could not find or engage the owner of an empty home. The Service were ambitious to do more on empty homes. A summary of the homes brought back into use and current work was provided. The rationale for the prioritisation of hardest first was also given. Those left empty for less than 6 months usually come back in to use on their own. A technical point was made on what is funded by the Housing Revenue Account and how much work can go out to local officers to assist with properties on that basis. It was emphasised that anyone who has a lead should report these to the empty homes officer.

Relating to investment in existing homes, clarification was requested around a specific case that would benefit from better insulation for mould prevention. The response from officers offered to follow up on the specific case. It was noted that the Service were doing targeted, proactive works around mould prevention at an additional 400 properties.

Clarification was requested regarding the status of the waiting list for the housing register. The response from the Assistant Director of Housing noted there were 6,600 on the waiting list. A proportion of these would not be bidding and others would be actively seeking. The rise in numbers over time would be provided outside the meeting.

Members noted that where the right-to-buy was previously sought, the properties had now been sold again and were now privately rented, and often would require investment to raise the properties up to standard. Members requested additional details on the pace of right-to-buy

properties leaving the Council's housing stock. The response noted a pace of 150 to 200 per year. The Council were now replacing more than were being sold following a long period of breaking even. This meant that the Council were catching up on the decades of selling more right-to-buy.

Members requested more information on the outlook on accessible bungalows. The response noted this was an area where specific provision had been done. These properties required comparatively more land and tended to be expensive. It was something the Service would like to do more of. The Service had an Aids and Adaptations Service which had presented reports to scrutiny previously. The Service tended to focus those budgets on less costly interventions; however, these were done where the case was strong. If the Service had funding, it would do more of this.

Clarification was requested around how the Service assess features that must be repaired or replaced prior to new tenants moving into a property. The Service noted the effort to ensure aids and adaptations in place are matched up with the individuals who require these. It was acknowledged that the process is more straightforward for aids and adaptations than for things like carpets. The Service had found that the carpet often has to be changed. Given the environmental implications, clarification of the assessment for carpets was requested to be provided outside the meeting.

Members noted that some areas could not be purposed for Housing and requested more information around the suitability of acquiring lower energy properties that currently have high turnaround tenancies. The response referenced the Sites and Policies document that was adopted in 2018 and confirmed that the Council was acquiring mainly new properties. The Service exercised caution around purchasing older properties, many of which require a lot of investment because they do not meet the Council's minimum standards.

Resolved:-

- 1) That the report be noted and a further update be considered in 12 months' time.
- 2) That engagement with new SME builders, developers and investors continue to be prioritised.
- 3) That consideration be given to possible interventions which could link up existing services to support people to continue their tenancies rather than joining the housing register.
- 4) That Members continue to be consulted around use of the Design Guide for new developments.

63. WORK PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to an updated outline schedule of scrutiny work. The Chair advised that outcomes from the review of selective licensing would be submitted to the next meeting, to coincide with completion of the Service's engagement activity with landlords and tenants.

The Chair also advised that Members had completed a scoping exercise for the review into nature recovery. The purpose of the review was to consider strategic approaches already in place and propose any additional interventions that can help the Council achieve its targets and fulfil its responsibilities under the Environment Act 2021. The review would proceed in two steps.

In the first step, Members will assess the state of biodiversity in Rotherham. With a view to protecting existing biodiversity, members will meet to establish the state of biodiversity in Rotherham. This step sought to examine pollution levels in air, soil and water and the associated impact on biodiversity. The impact of wildlife crime would also be considered. Consultees will be asked to highlight species and ecosystems currently at risk. The outcome of the first step will identify where efforts should be focussed to ameliorate effects of pollution where possible and protect existing biodiversity.

In the second step, members examine biodiversity improvement actions currently in place. With a view to enhancing biodiversity, this step will seek to establish what action is already being taken by the Council, by community organisations and by partners to achieve targets and uphold duties under the Environment Act 2021. The outcome of this second step will identify possible additional interventions to be made.

Resolved:-

- 1) That the report and proposed schedule of work and scope of review of nature recovery be noted.
- 2) That authority be delegated to the Governance Advisor in consultation with the Chair and Vice-chair to make changes to the schedule of work as appropriate between meetings, reporting any changes back to the next meeting for endorsement.

64. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that there were no urgent items of business requiring consideration at the meeting.

65. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

Resolved:-

- 1) That the next meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission will take place on 9 May 2023, commencing at 1.30 pm in Rotherham Town Hall.