

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 9 May 2023**

Present:- Councillors Wyatt (in the Chair), Aveyard, Bennett-Sylvester, Browne, C Carter, Castledine-Dack, Cowen, Ellis, Havard, Jones, McNeely, Monk and Tinsley.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors T. Collingham Khan and Taylor and from Ms. M. Jacques.

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

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

66. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 21 MARCH 2023

Resolved:-

- 1) That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 21 March 2023, be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

67. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Tinsley declared a pecuniary interest in respect of agenda item 6 as a license holder.

68. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

The Chair confirmed that no questions had been submitted.

69. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Chair advised that there were no items of business on the agenda that would require the exclusion of the press or public from the meeting.

70. TREE PROGRAMME UPDATE

Consideration was given to an update report in respect of the delivery of the Tree Management Protocol, the maintenance programme and tree planting programme. The report outlined progress against recommendations from the previous update which was submitted to scrutiny in the spring of 2022. A software update would allow the Service to reflect the planting within current ward boundaries, enabling further publicity and engagement around the planting. The process for prioritisation had been benchmarked successfully with a positive outcome confirming the process was fit for purpose. The significant numbers of trees that had been planted in Dinnington were highlighted, and fruit trees had been planted in several areas. A breakdown of fruit tree planting was provided. The timetable for next steps for the Service were also provided.

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In discussion, members thanked officers for the environment days in Brinsworth and requested clarification of the points in the report describing environment days, including planting of bulbs and coronation fruit trees. The Service confirmed the participation of Brinsworth in the environment days.

Members sought additional information around the process governing the estimated ten percent of planting that did not survive, and whether funding for the planting was predicated on survival of the trees. The response from the Assistant Director of Culture Sport and Tourism noted that the Tree Planting Officer oversaw the implementation of a similar process across a number of wards around the portion of planting that does not survive. This process promoted community involvement in the process as much as possible. The response from the Green Spaces Manager noted that tree failures were part of the planting process, which includes a requirement to replace trees that fail due to natural reasons. Some trees are damaged due to vandalism, which the Service does replace. The Service seek extra funding where there has been vandalism of the trees. Tree failures due to drought within the previous year had resulted in further funding received. It was usually the next planting year when the failure would become evident. The disparity between urban and woodland tree failure was noted. Within woodlands or local parks the outcomes are much better.

Members pointed out that the most deprived ten percent of neighbourhoods in the Borough have had about sixteen trees planted in two years. Members affirmed the need for multiple kinds of community engagement and using data from the first year to inform planting in the subsequent years, and engagement around opportunities for planting. Longer lead-in time was desired so that Members could help maximise the engagement and planning around the planting opportunities. Of special interest are how trees are considered within housing and planning activities, where there are likely to be new developments taking place. The response from the Assistant Director affirmed openness to receiving feedback and seeking new ways of working. The Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion noted that working with the schools had been an area of good practice and ongoing dialogue regarding opportunities to get involved. The Assistant Director noted that the Service was in the process of recruiting a new Trees Service Manager and team, including more tree officers and seasonal tree staff. This was in addition to the two current tree officers. The Countryside Manager was currently overseeing the Tree Service Manager roles to undertake the basic tree assessment which alerts the Service if there is an issue and allows the service to discount trees that do not have a need.

Members noted the currently very small team to care for 100,000 trees and the trebling of resources planned. Members expressed hopes that the salary for the recruiting roles would be competitive so as to make the roles interesting to prospective team members. Officers confirmed that the Service was in discussion with Human Resources around next steps.

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Members sought further information around the engagement of schools with the programme and expressed interest in more information around any plans to expand work with schools. The response from Cabinet Member noted the prioritisation basis by which the Service approaches engagement. In the winter months the priority was to focus on tree planting. There was also a requirement to engage with the community. And throughout the year, there was substantial health and safety work undertaken by the Service. Officers noted that Academies have their own fundings, so they have different engagement needs. The Service does seek to capture the information for the benefit of increased awareness as they care for a huge amount of stock. There had been work with a multi-academy trust to attend several schools. Occasionally, a school may have a maintenance need.

Members requested clarification around the levels of interest and enthusiasm the Service had observed in individual programmes for schools. Members expressed hopes that children's enthusiasm would be nurtured and directed through improved engagement with schools. The Cabinet Member noted that the Service have limited scope for involvement and influence in schools or multi-academy trusts. The schools had maintenance responsibilities if there were a broken water pipe. Schools make decisions regarding the environment they want to provide.

The Chair described an example of a school that had done their own planting, demonstrating how the programme can be enhanced by the local community. Consideration must be given to avoid possible interference with other assets such as CCTV.

Members requested further details about the instances of vandalism and any recourse of the Council against perpetrators of these crimes. The Green Spaces Manager noted that the instances were rare and often in isolated areas. The crime constitutes criminal damage, but a crime must have a witness to identify the perpetrator. Where this could be proven, usually it would be the Police who prosecuted criminal damage.

Members sought assurances that all Tree Preservation Orders are captured on maps. The response affirmed that Tree Preservation Orders are mapped and that the records are available to view by Members. Some indicate a need for specialist pruning, such as for fruit trees. It was acknowledged that fruit trees were not the right tree to plant in every location. The Service strove to plant the right tree in the right area. The Service, for example, do not plant fruit trees beside highways, creating a potential hazard.

Members expressed disappointment that many trees seemed to have been planted disproportionately into a single area. The response from the Cabinet Member identified the reason for the apparent disparity in terms of the planting numbers at Dinnington as being a result of a huge scheme on a massive area of woodland.

The Chair noted that one of the main areas of casework were the mature trees, however, loss of the trees was not desired. A balance was sought. Therefore, recruitment was welcome to help maintain the rapid pace of response.

Further details were requested regarding the future of funding. The response from the Green Spaces Manager acknowledged that long term, funding amounts were uncertain. The service applied for funding on an annual basis and had no reason to believe that similar funding opportunities will become unavailable. Central government seemed to be carrying on funding for now, so the Service were catching the funding that was available.

Resolved:-

- 1) That the report be noted.
- 2) That the Service note the feedback from Members regarding tree management.

71. SCRUTINY REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS - IMPACT OF SELECTIVE LICENCING

Consideration was given to a report summarising the findings and recommendations of a scrutiny review into the impact of the selective licencing scheme in Rotherham at its halfway point. The selective licencing scheme, which ran from 2020-2025, focussed on alleviating deprivation and poor housing conditions in specific residential areas of Parkgate, Thurcroft, Maltby, Dinnington, Eastwood/Town Centre and Masbrough. The review sought to assess the impact of the scheme so far and identify further steps and risk mitigations that will help to build positively upon the accomplishments of the scheme to date. Among the principal findings were that the widely held assumption must be dispelled that selective licencing supported beautification; rather, the inspections promote health and safety of residents. The shortage of key professionals was also a limiting factor on the reach of the scheme.

Having previously declared an interest, Cllr Tinsley excused himself from participation in the discussion and vote.

In discussion, Members expressed concerns around the adequacy of the engagement with landlords and tenants, due to the low number of responses. The response from the Head of Community Safety provided assurances that the surveys were sent to a large number of recipients and publicised through multiple platforms and channels. Thirteen responses from landlords and seven from tenants had been received. The feedback received would be considered and taken on board but was not statistically significant. There were significant amounts of time spent by officers utilising social media platforms and local forums. Efforts were done to try to receive a wider and more populous response. Members suggested

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working with Acorn a Tenants' Union who can act as a representative body, and with Rotherham Federation of Communities.

Members suggested that yearly expectations and costs could be made clearer in communication to license holders. There had been confusion that fees are paid each year rather than once for the duration of the scheme.

Members questioned the apparent necessity of the Service to be fully self-funding, as this limits the reach of the scheme. The response of the Service was expected to include benchmarking around whether schemes elsewhere are also fully self-funding.

The Chair noted that any response would likely require a more labour-intensive approach. It was felt that there was a need for Selective Licencing in part of Maltby due to high turnover of tenancies. The Chair affirmed that the response will impact the future of the scheme. It was acknowledged that responsibility does not sit solely with landlords, as many are doing their job well. The response from officers confirmed that there was a discount for landlords who pass inspection. The Service was using the market to shape the discount and the offer to landlords. The Service looked for more ways to reward responsible landlords.

Members noted that, within Select Licencing areas, language barriers prevented some stakeholders from accessing the Facebook groups. It was acknowledged that some individuals could be harder to reach with digital methods of engagement.

Members affirmed the importance of reinspection, and that as long as a landlord continues to be out of compliance there should be action until the problems are resolved. This was felt to be necessary to improve the trust of residents that the scheme would be effectual.

The Chair acknowledged consultation fatigue may be present within the communities that the Service is trying to reach. There was a wider journey around consultation that needed to be undertaken.

Resolved:-

- 1) That the response to mould and damp hazards in housing be considered for inclusion in the work programme for 2023/24.
- 2) That the following recommendations be submitted to Overview and Scrutiny Management Board for consideration and endorsement.
 - a) That reinspection be prioritised for landlords whose properties have required action previously.

- b) Due to the shortage of experienced inspectors, that consideration be given to how the Council may support recruitment and development of trainee inspectors and retention of experienced inspectors.
- c) That consideration be given to incentivising responsible landlords, and, where there is a proven track record, empowering landlords to self-assess, provided that the Service can still obtain assurances that decent standards are maintained.
- d) That consideration be given to managing expectations around selective licencing as a measure focused on the health of residents rather than beautification or regeneration.
- e) That consideration be given to how uptake of the cost-of-living support offer among families in selective licencing areas may be further promoted and monitored with a view to identifying gaps and promoting financial inclusion.
- f) Given the complexity of measuring impact on deprivation and difficulty in improving relative levels of deprivation, that consideration be given to how internal metrics may better reflect the real impact of the scheme.
- g) That a joined-up approach be sought with relevant Council strategies and services, with partner and voluntary sector organisations and with resident led initiatives prior to any future selective licencing declaration.
- h) That engagement with landlords and with tenants be considered alongside any response to the above recommendations, and that the response to the above recommendations be subject to the learning.

72. URGENT BUSINESS

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

73. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

Resolved:-

- 1) That the next meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission will take place on 6 June 2023, commencing at 1.30 pm.