

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 24 October 2023**

Present:- Councillors Wyatt (Chair), Andrews, Atkin, Bennett-Sylvester, C Carter, Cowen, Ellis, Havard, McNeely, Taylor and Tinsley (Vice Chair); and co-opted member Mrs. M. Jacques, representing Rotherham Federation of Communities.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Aveyard and T. Collingham and from Mrs. K. Bacon.

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

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

29. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 19 SEPTEMBER 2023

Pursuant to Minute No. 24, the Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion shared an update on events that had taken place over the weekend prior to the meeting. The Cabinet Member expressed profound sympathies for the families in Catcliffe and in other areas of the Borough affected by flooding during the weekend. The Cabinet Member outlined the impact of the floods and the unprecedented levels of the River Rother which had been recorded. The Cabinet Member described the support provided by Council teams throughout the weekend which was ongoing. Reports were also being assembled to capture learning from the events. These reports would be public in the weeks and months ahead. Regarding community working, the Cabinet Member had met with parish councillors just prior to the meeting to ascertain how their response had worked alongside the overarching Place response of the Council and other partners. This discussion provided support to the Parish Councils and gathered insights and learning. This relationship would continue to be nurtured and developed through open communication and mutual support, with a full analysis to follow.

Members noted that scrutiny had reviewed flooding alleviation after the 2007 floods, and again in 2019 to consider learning. Members expressed a desire to receive the forthcoming reports for overview. Members also expressed their gratitude to the volunteers and staff.

Members felt that the briefing for Members had been effective, as this equipped Members to pass on useful information, for example, around road closures. Members sought additional information regarding the decision to take the rail network offline from late Friday morning. The response from the Cabinet Member explained that the call was made by Network Rail to take their signalling and electrical components out of the track. This was believed to be the right call, because the tracks did flood and remained flooded there. In 2019, when the tracks flooded, the station also flooded, resulting in Rotherham being without trains for nine days. The precaution of removing the signalling and electrical components

meant that when Network Rail were ready to put the equipment back in place after the water had receded, they could do so right away. This reduced the duration of service disruption.

The Chair noted that Kilnhurst Primary School, which had been vulnerable to floods in the past, had external equipment that had been in the deluge. Following half-term holidays, it was hoped that the children would be able to come back to school, as the interior of the school had not flooded.

The Chair noted that the Commission continued to pursue answers to questions submitted to Yorkshire Water.

Resolved:-

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 19 September, 2023, be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

30. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

As a landlord, Cllr Tinsley declared a disclosable pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Item 7 – Homelessness and Rough Sleepers Strategy.

31. 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.

32. 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.

33. NEIGHBOURHOODS ANNUAL REPORT

Consideration was given to a report presented by the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Working and the Head of Neighbourhoods. It was noted that the model was described as exemplary following a recent peer review by the LGA. Cabinet had refreshed and updated the Strategy last year, including a delivery plan for the new updated strategy, included in the report. The strategy was based upon the priorities and objectives set out within the Council Plan. The delivery plan was summarised, and also included many priorities reflected within the ward plans. Continuous engagement was ongoing to inform the delivery plan and ward priorities.

Areas of focus included providing more opportunities for people with protected characteristics to participate in and engage with the delivery of the Strategy, and increasing the visibility of ward priorities across the Council. A programme of neighbourhood tours for staff had also been introduced, so that staff have a sense of the neighbourhoods they serve. Community safety issues were also being addressed within the Strategy

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through partnership working with South Yorkshire Police to improve CAPS and tasking groups. Regarding this, proposals informed by Members would be submitted to the Safer Rotherham Partnership. Integrated locality working was a further area for development.

In discussion, the Chair clarified the term Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) was a source of funding from new developments that is used to deliver priorities and projects within the wards.

Members requested further information regarding the development of the website. The response from the Head of Neighbourhoods indicated that regular posts from the Service feed into the website, but previously the messages were routed first through the Council's corporate news feed. This was being resolved so that the Service could post directly onto the ward webpages.

Members sought more information regarding the work to achieve parity between wards. The response from the Cabinet Member and the Head of Neighbourhoods illustrated a key way the Strategy aimed to achieve parity was in the priority area of perceptions of safety. This was being delivered through improvements to functionality of the CAPS, tackling ASB issues, and submitting a series of proposals to the Safer Rotherham Partnership to this effect.

Members sought further clarification of times and targets for the delivery plan with a view to being able to show impact and value added, noting that much of the work is to support and enable work of other services. The response from the Head of Neighbourhoods explained the absence of times and targets from the report is due to cross referencing strategies from other parts of the Council which are linked into the Neighbourhoods Strategy but have their own impact targets and delivery plans. This was not repeated in this report in the interest of avoiding duplication. Ward plans, however, did have their own impact and were included within the delivery plan. Statistics and ward breakdowns alongside case studies, provided evidence to demonstrate impact. Members noted the desire for time scales and targets to be added, especially to track progress with expanding inclusion.

Members noted the ambition of the service for continuous improvement and sought more information on how the delivery of the Neighbourhood Working Model is narrowing the gap between more deprived and less deprived areas within the borough and how the Strategy will have an impact on addressing deprivation. In terms of more deprived and less deprived neighbourhoods, the response from the Cabinet Member noted the continuation of allocating some parts of the budget based on the numbers of households, with other parts of the budget allocated based on the number of council households, within which there may be a higher proportion of deprived households. A system was currently being developed whereby neighbourhoods could be considered according to indices that would identify the areas that had the most to gain from

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improved access to resources.

Members sought to know more details around the challenges faced in the delivery of the Strategy and how these were addressed. The response from the Cabinet Member explained that the position was being reviewed as to whether or not there were enough housing officers in each ward based on the complexity of need within the wards. The existing roles of housing officers were also under review, to consider if these were the right roles to deal with the complexity well. It was noted that although the distribution was felt to be fair numerically, there were some areas where pressure on the role of a housing officer was very different to other areas. These considerations would be factored in in time for next year's budget decisions.

Elaborating on the role of the north, south, and central areas of the borough, the Head of Neighbourhoods noted the directive of government was that in any areas where there is a parish, the Community Infrastructure Levy money will go to parishes. To help tackle inequalities, Neighbourhoods Teams promote the ward priorities that Members have designated to make sure the Council is responding to the priorities set by Members. This informs the areas of focus for service delivery and policy.

Regarding Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) moneys, Members sought additional insight into whether utility companies invest in the community. The response from the Head of Neighbourhoods indicated that although CIL was primarily around housing development, the question would be passed on to planning colleagues for response.

Members requested additional information regarding whether CIL and allocated ward budgets would be going up in line with inflation. The response from the Cabinet Member noted that indicative numbers for next year were similar to the numbers for this year and would not likely be going up.

Members sought to find out if more case studies could be shared around enforcement activity and outcomes. The response from the Head of Neighbourhoods reaffirmed that ward data should be received on a quarterly basis. This data included police, environmental health, and housing data. If this data was not received regularly, Members were requested to contact the Head of Neighbourhoods directly. It was noted that the Service continually pressed for better communications with Children's Services, especially around consultations and schemes. Whilst communications had shown some improvement as a result, it was felt that there was room for more improvement. The Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion responded to note that the feedback of Members regarding publicity of events which receive Children's Capital of Culture funds would be shared with the Service.

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Resolved:-

1. That the progress of the delivery of the Thriving Neighbourhoods Strategy be noted.
2. That inflation and rising costs of materials and labour should be factored into ward delegated budgets.
3. That the outcomes of proposals to the Safer Rotherham Partnership be submitted for overview.

34. HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPER STRATEGY

Consideration was given to an update report and presentation by the Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, the Assistant Director of Housing, and the Head of Housing options, who were joined by the CEO of local partner organisation, Shiloh. The presentation summarised progress on the implementation of the refreshed Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy, including context information around the increase in homelessness nationally and regionally, due to factors such as cost of living, cost of housing, and support needs. The response to these challenges experienced by the Service in Rotherham was described, and the results of a public engagement exercise at the Rotherham Show were shared, indicating room for greater awareness among Rotherham residents of the issues around homelessness and the support available.

The refreshed strategy had placed additional Service emphasis on prevention and early intervention. Trauma involved in having to move can actually be avoided with the right support in place. It was noted that some rents were rising, which put pressure on individuals, and there are fewer moving on options for people. All local authorities were seeking to employ homelessness officers, and the Service was now fully staffed. A training programme was being delivered to develop staff, and current case loads were described, including new cases and closed cases. The highest reasons for presentation were family and friends not being able to accommodate, the loss of private rented accommodated, and the sales of the properties. Families temporarily in hotels were moved into permanent housing or other housing as soon as possible, because it was unlawful to have more than six families in hotels for more than six weeks. The lettings and move on information for households were also provided.

Rough sleeping counts had been reducing steadily since 2018. There were three that had been found in September, who were not engaging with services. The six o'clock walks by officers had been accompanied by councillors. If the offer of support was refused, the Service kept trying, as sometimes it was hard for the person to decide to engage with Services for a range of reasons.

The Chief Executive of Shiloh then summarised the activity and delivery of the Shiloh charity in Rotherham which prioritises services toward those most in need. The Shiloh services were delivered from a neutral venue,

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primarily set up for rough sleepers to provide a warm welcome, and offer a full change of clothing, laundry, and food. These Monday and Friday drop-in services were delivered specifically for the homeless team for Rotherham Council. This is because rough sleepers struggle to engage with authority. On Wednesdays, a multi-agency drop in was hosted for a two- to three-hour window, providing access to every service within one place, including officers from the Council's homelessness team, drug and alcohol service, universal credit, citizens advice, Gates surgery and NHS mental health clinician. This helped to stop the entrenchment that made engagement very difficult.

In conclusion, the presentation reaffirmed the six priorities of the Strategy and outlined improvements to the refreshed website for the Service where additional information had been made available.

In discussion, Members requested additional details regarding the possibility of increasing energy standards for private rented properties. The Assistant Director of Housing provided context for the discussion around energy standards for the private rented sector. The shortage of accommodation and retrofit rules were described, and the lack of security in the sector which was a key driver in central government's own impact assessment, leading to the likelihood that there would not be a requirement to achieve C energy efficiency under the Renters Reform Bill. The Council was in a position that was unfortunately in competition with other authorities who were placing within the Borough, and landlords were more likely to work with the Home Office because this paid more. The private sector therefore presented challenges, and it was important for the Council to consider continually how its schemes can be more attractive options for landlords.

Members noted the excellent cross-agency working which was delivered by the Service and sought additional information regarding landlords who may not be following the requirements around Section 21 notices and whether the Service worked with developers in the built-to-rent market. The response from the Assistant Director of Housing and the Head of Housing Options noted that staff were aware of how it should be done and were thoroughly trained to pick up on any issues with section 21 notices. Built to rent developments involved rates that were higher than the local housing allocation rate. This was one of the big challenges that the homelessness service has in finding prospective properties. The suggestion of working with professional landlords was noted to be explored further.

Members expressed curiosity around whether there was any desire to keep some private rented houses available for use as temporary accommodation when needed? Hotels were hard to find within Rotherham. The Service had at times had to move people out of hotels because the hotel was taken over by the Home Office. Other local authorities also placed people in hotels within Rotherham. If there was a show on at the arena, for example, this had an impact on whether local

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hotels were available for families. Sometimes, the Service found there was not a place in Rotherham. This required the Service to look further afield for placements such as within the Dearne Valley, or Attercliffe, which were as near to Rotherham as possible and still within South Yorkshire. The portfolio of temporary accommodation was being expanded. Key choices property management achieved 100 properties, and the service was currently considering incentives for landlords such as rent guarantees to provide assurances. This involved setting out what would be the offer and the business case to see what would attract landlords to take a homeless household. A gap analysis regarding age groups had been done, and the Service had successfully obtained funding for single people, with four assessment beds in ten properties.

Members sought additional details around sustainment of the Service, especially for the Service to be able to answer or return phone calls and respond to enquiries. The response from the Head of Housing Options described assistance from the contact centre with fielding calls when the team were down to three staff members. The team had now taken the calls back, and there was now a prevention and intervention team. The team were dedicated to managing with the resources that the team had. Members expressed thanks to the three officers who continued to deliver the Service during such a pressured time.

Members noted that getting the homeless people through this stage of their lives and into training and employment was a credit to the Financial Inclusion Team. Further clarification was requested regarding the rough sleeper figures. The response from the Head of Housing Options clarified the figures in the table which referred to the time between April and September, and the other figures referred to the annual count from March 2022 to April 2023.

Further information was requested regarding the budget for the Service. The response from the Assistant Director of Housing indicated that this year is going to bring significant pressure. There was an overspend that would continue to move around in response to the housing market which was part of the regular budgets which were published. Most of this pressure was related to hotel accommodation.

The Assistant Director of Housing provided an update following the weekend floods, which resulted in a total of 16 households being rehoused into hotel and extended placements to the end of the week, and a series of welfare checks were being undertaken. The service were looking at medium term rehousing for these households, and many wanted to be able to go back to their own homes. The situation of private tenants without insurance was different to a Council tenant who has a property to return to once the Council returned the property to a fit state. Some funding could be sought through the Bellwind Scheme for major incidents. There were associated budgetary impacts.

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Additional assurances were requested that no homelessness person or rough sleeper was currently in danger. The response from the Head of Housing Options provided assurances that the service worked on the basis of intelligence garnered from officers and rough sleeper outreach workers, and there had been no reports of rough sleepers in flooded areas.

Members offered further condolences to residents in Catcliffe and Treeton and noted the journey to being fully staffed. Foreseeing increased pressure on the service, Members sought to know whether the team could be scaled if needed. The response from officers noted that through a homelessness prevention grant, a migration team had been set up, and there was an accommodation officer to work with private landlords and with the Home Office around decision-making. This specialist support was in place to alleviate pressure. There was also more office-based officer working. There were three experienced officers in the office sharing knowledge to contribute to the rapid training of new team members. New officers were paired with experienced officers to keep people motivated. The managers in the office were also visible to be a resource to team members. There was also a concerted and thorough training plan. It was important to recognise the work staff were doing and to ensure they feel valued.

Members requested additional details regarding actions the Council was taking to increase the volume of temporary residences. The response from the Assistant Director of Housing noted, as an example, that the Council owned a stock of fifteen properties designated for victims of domestic abuse. There was a knock-on effect to increasing the stock of temporary residences, and a decision was open to the Council. The need to increase the stock was evident from the financial pressures that had been mentioned.

Members sought further understand support to streamline the process which requires someone who has been through Key Choices to submit all of their information again to the homelessness Service if they receive a section 21 notice. The response from the Head of Housing Options noted that more support was available, and it was acknowledged that this interface could be more flexible. An external review of the service had been commissioned which would examine the customer journey as part of the review. Some elements, such as providing up to date bank statements did have to be up to date. Specific elements that people had to complete in order to go onto the waiting list that were not included in other submissions would be considered as part of the review.

Members sought to know whether houses purchased by the Council would help with homelessness or temporary accommodation. The response from officers noted that according to the housing acquisition policy, as part of section 106, these homes were added to the Council's housing stock. This added on the order of 100 properties, including properties that were previously purchased by right to buy. It is often

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cheaper to purchase these than to build them. The acquired properties would be used as general needs or as temporary accommodation, with the necessary staffing. The Council would make decisions at budget setting around how much of that will be done.

Members sought additional details around whether the Service maintained any register of landlords. The response from officers noted that the Service did have increased knowledge of private sector landlords and had an officer in strategic housing who worked with the private landlords, so although there was not a formal list of properties, officers did have knowledge of this.

Members also sought to know whether the Service rehoused pets as well, and whether the support offered was being shared effectively in messaging. The response from officers noted that one of the hotels accommodated dogs, and a review of temporary accommodation would consider pets. Officers were not aware of other cases where a dog could not be accommodated. The Service offered kennels as required. On Saturday, one of the first things staff were doing was to call around to kennels to try to ensure accommodation. Staff were mindful that a pet is regarded as a member of the family. Sometimes there could be some practical management reasons why this was not always possible to have pets in a property, but as a principle, the Service tried to accommodate pets if possible. In terms of Council support at Catcliffe, Strategic Director for Regeneration and Environment described how the drainage team with pumps had been the first to arrive to Catcliffe Friday morning, handing off to the highways team and activating the emergency rest centre in the very early hours of Saturday morning. These teams had maintained their presence there and continued providing support.

Resolved:-

1. That the report be noted.
2. That thanks be passed on to the team who have kept the frontline service going during significant staffing pressures.
3. That thanks to Shiloh and voluntary sector partners be recorded for their work with people who would not otherwise readily engage with statutory agencies and services.

35. WORK PROGRAMME

Resolved:-

1. That the report and proposed schedule of work 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 changes back to the next meeting for endorsement.

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36. URGENT BUSINESS

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

37. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

Resolved:-

That the next meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission will take place on Tuesday, 12 December 2023, commencing at 1.30pm in Rotherham Town Hall.