

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 9 July 2024

Present:- Councillor McKiernan (in the Chair); Councillors Adair, Ahmed, Beck, Beresford, C. Carter, Cowen, Havard, Jackson, Jones, Rashid, Stables, Thorp, Tinsley and Williams.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Baggaley and Castledine-Dack.

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

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

9. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 4 JUNE 2024

Resolved: That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 4 June 2024 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

10. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

11. 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.

12. 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.

13. OVERVIEW OF THE PORTFOLIO OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING

The Chair welcomed Councillor Sarah Allen, Cabinet Member for Housing to the meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Housing provided an overview of the portfolio of the Cabinet Member for Housing and highlighted that housing wasn't just about houses or homes of any description. She emphasised it was very much about people first and foremost, and then it was about looking after the Council's assets and residents of private properties. She believed the reason she was at the meeting was that both of these aspects contribute to our sense of place and the development of places within the Borough, as listed in the document provided.

Further, the Cabinet Member for Housing focused on Housing – People,

Property, and Place by dividing it into seven sections.

Estate Management: It was informed that this section was led by Paul Walsh, Head of Housing and Estate Management which included the North, South, and Central locality-based housing teams. These teams consisted of housing officers who regularly interacted with residents within their wards. They conducted tenancy health checks and provided some estate caretaking services, while other services were managed by corporate asset management.

The borough had nearly 20,000 Council properties and was among the top 20 Council social landlords in the country. The ambition was to become the best among these 20. That morning, discussions were held with the other 19 councils as part of the "C20" initiative. This group aimed to lobby for necessary support from the new government for housing across the country.

Property services: It was informed that this section was led by Lyndsey Stevenson, Head of Housing Property Services who looked after the repairs and maintenance contracts. These contracts, which had been delivered by the Council, were recently renewed for two years. The Cabinet Member for Housing informed that in the coming year, everybody would have an opportunity to be involved in reviewing that contract.

She also informed that Mears and Equans, our partners in delivering housing services, handled over 90,000 repairs per annum. They were also responsible for compliance testing for lifts, and fire, gas, electric, and water asbestos, as well as managing the damp and mould service.

She highlighted that Awaab's Law brought about a review of how authorities deal with damp and mould, resulting in 29 points of action that we were now obliged to follow. The most significant point was the speed at which we handle damp and mould referrals. Given that referrals increased from tens to hundreds per year, this added considerable pressure in meeting the set timescales. Despite this, the service had significantly improved and would continue to do so.

Housing allocation: The Cabinet Member for Housing emphasised that a housing register wasn't a waiting list, and that terminology was not applicable. There were just over 7,200 people on the register in Rotherham. She mentioned that the Allocations Policy, in place since 2014, had undergone various changes over the decade, including legislative updates, resulting in a somewhat piecemeal policy. The ongoing review aimed to make the policy more coherent and up to date, ensuring compliance with current requirements.

The Allocations Policy was used to assess individual housing needs. When someone approached the authority to be accepted onto the housing register, they underwent a series of interviews to determine their housing needs. This assessment determined their level of priority. There

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were four bands of priority, and individuals were placed into one of these bands based on their needs. Everyone on the register had an allocated place according to their priority. The review of the allocations policy focused on prioritising housing for those in greatest need.

Tenant engagement: The Cabinet Member for Housing informed that TPAS, known as tenant engagement experts, was an organisation we should all be proud of, reflecting positively on the entire authority. Much of our tenant engagement work was done in partnership with RotherFed, which had just successfully bid for a contract to continue working with us for the next three years. The Housing Involvement Panel, which Councillor Terry Adair participated in, brought together representatives and volunteers to discuss housing services. This panel was facilitated by RotherFed.

Efforts were made to make the panel more representative of the borough's residents through targeted work with various groups, especially those with protected characteristics. Urgently collected information about residents and their perceptions of our services led to new engagement methods. One such method was the "screen team," a group of nine people who met online to discuss various topics.

To engage younger residents, who made up 50% of our population under 40, they were invited to participate in an online forum. The response was phenomenal, resulting in a core group of younger people working with us. This group provided feedback on their experiences as council tenants, particularly those who had recently become tenants.

All these initiatives fell under the tenant satisfaction measures we were obliged to report on. The information collected was becoming increasingly significant due to the upcoming inspection by the social housing regulator.

Homelessness: The Cabinet Member for Housing highlighted the legal responsibility to house anyone who presented themselves as homeless. The increase in local homelessness cases was usually due to no-fault evictions, where landlords wanted to sell their properties or move into them, and family breakdowns where individuals could no longer stay with friends or family. It was informed that at the moment the meeting took place, the council had just over 500 open cases of homeless individuals and families we were working with on an individual basis.

She informed that homeless individuals could come to Riverside House and request immediate shelter, which we were obliged to provide. Our preference was to place them in council properties, but we also used hotels and B&Bs when necessary, although this was not the preferred option. Early engagement with those served notice helped us plan better and match their needs with available accommodation. All individuals and families underwent support assessments to determine their needs.

We currently had 113 units for homeless people and had recently secured

funding to provide an additional 60 units. However, this was still insufficient, and we were taking measures to provide more, including acquiring properties from the open market where available.

Social housing regulation inspection: The Cabinet Member for Housing informed that a new proactive inspection regime started in April this year. The Social Housing Regulator would inspect every authority in the country to assess the efficacy and efficiency of their housing services. Although they provided some guidance, the details were sparse, similar to an Ofsted inspection. They had only completed one inspection since April, which involved a 12-week assessment with only two days spent face-to-face. The rest was desk-based, involving the review of numerous documents.

The Council was systematically reviewing our current policies to ensure they were up to date. Compliance testing was a significant focus, with the regulator ensuring we met requirements for fire, asbestos, water, and more. Additionally, tenant satisfaction was crucial, with 12 perception measures created to gauge residents' views on our services.

We identified areas needing improvement and established a Housing Assurance Board, chaired by the Chief Executive, to address these gaps. An honest dialogue with the regulator led to a clear guide on what they would inspect, akin to a peer review. This process was expected to conclude within four years, though the exact timing was uncertain.

Finally, the Cabinet Member for Housing mentioned the professionalisation of housing employees, with an emphasis on obtaining professional housing qualifications through apprenticeships at various levels. This was in line with the regulator's expectations for authority employees.

In response to Councillor Beresford's question, it was explained that the current owner of a property acquired through the Right to Buy scheme must inform us if they wish to sell it. The Right to Buy scheme includes a clause giving the Council the first right of refusal on any Right to Buy property. This has recently caused issues for some individuals who, during the conveyancing process, did not realise that this clause existed. If a flat owner decides to sell their property, they must offer it to the Council first. If this occurs, we will consider buying the property back. Despite having a robust house-building programme, we currently receive more requests to buy properties than we can build, so we are indeed interested in purchasing these properties.

The Chair asked about reducing homelessness and rough sleeping, he enquired whether the council works with letting agencies to inform residents facing eviction. It was explained that this was indeed what council did. We had officers within the Homelessness Team who worked with the private letting sector. When a resident informed us that they would be evicted in six weeks, we engaged in a conversation to explore

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all available options. We aimed to avoid making a council house the first and only option. Our approach involved understanding the resident's needs, preferences, and affordability. We then collaborated with letting agents to see what properties are available, essentially trying to match residents with suitable housing options.

Councillor Havard sought clarification in relation to tenancy health checks and the training of housing officers to understand residents' needs. It was explained that traditionally, our focus during tenancy health checks had been on the condition of the property and compliance with tenancy agreements. However, there had been a realisation that these checks provide a perfect opportunity to discuss residents' health, financial concerns, and other issues. We aimed to offer advice and support where needed, but this approach hadn't been systematic enough yet.

Regarding apprenticeship schemes, the Cabinet Member for Housing informed that she did not possess all the information but highlighted that apprentices were required to complete a project addressing current issues within the authority that matter most to tenants. These apprenticeships were designed to focus on practical application, aiming to produce qualified housing professionals who prioritised both property management and resident welfare.

Councillor Williams asked about the possibility of bringing services back in-house during the re-tendering process evaluation and it was responded affirmatively, stating that currently, 100% of services are delivered by external contractors or specialist providers. She emphasised openness to consider bringing some services back in-house as part of the evaluation process.

The Chair queried whether the two different companies involved in service delivery were performing similar or different tasks and it was responded that Mears and Equans performed similar tasks but with a focus on different localities within the borough. While each had its specialisation, they operated across the entire area as required.

The Chair asked if there was support for housing targets and specific locations for building houses. It was explained that a national target of constructing 1.5 million houses over the next five years had been set, which was considered ambitious. Locally, there are aspirations to build 1,000 houses by 2026. Historically, the maximum number of houses built annually has been around 500. Given the scale of the national target, additional funding would be necessary to achieve it effectively.

Discussions at a recent meeting with over 19 social landlords aimed to ensure the new government understands the challenges faced by social landlords and local authorities in meeting these targets and to seek necessary support. This concluded the discussion on housing targets and locations for new construction.

Councillor Tinsley sought clarification on whether green spaces or green fields could be used for building, considering the local plan nearing review. It was explained that areas designated as greenbelt are typically restricted from development, including old industrial sites or redundant car parks within these zones. Despite not being traditional green spaces, they fell under greenbelt regulations, preventing construction. There had been ongoing debate in planning circles over the past five to six years about potentially amending greenbelt definitions to allow development on such sites, although opinions on this varied.

Councillor Jones asked about working with developers on land identified in the Local Plan, highlighting large-scale schemes like Bassingthorpe that have seen no progress for years. It was explained that the Council regularly met with developers to gauge their interest in developing plots of land. This proactive approach aimed to encourage collaboration with developers. Regarding Bassingthorpe, it was clarified that no developer was currently involved. The delay was due to ongoing negotiations between RMBC and the Fitzwilliam Estate, not a lack of developer interest. The Council had been persistent in pushing for progress and hoped for funding from the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority to facilitate development. However, progress was stalled until these negotiations concluded.

Resolved: That the Improving Places Select Commission:

1. Noted the overview from the Cabinet Member for Housing.
2. Agreed that consideration of the review into the Repairs and Maintenance contract would be added to the work programme at the appropriate time.

14. OVERVIEW OF THE PORTFOLIO OF THE DEPUTY LEADER AND CABINET MEMBER FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION & NEIGHBOURHOOD WORKING

The Chair welcomed Councillor Sheppard, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working to the meeting.

Councillor Sheppard provided an overview on each of the section of his portfolio as detailed below:

Member Neighbourhood Working and the Thriving Neighbourhoods Strategy: The Thriving Neighbourhood Strategy was introduced to ensure each ward had its own priorities. Meetings would take place with Neighbourhood Co-ordinators to agree the ward proprieties. These meetings would include a lot of data about the ward, including its demographics and information on the local community groups. He explained that he would attend some of those meetings to provide support where needed.

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Towns and Villages and Our Places Funds: The Towns and Villages Fund was being replaced by Our Places Fund, which was delivering investment into communities. Although the Our Places fund was in its infancy, it was noted that previous works had improve localities and it was hope that the communities had welcomed the improvements to their areas. A number of the schemes had elements that involved working with our partners, such as colleagues in highways to join up projects to minimise disruption to residents.

Parish Council Liaison: In the south and central areas of the borough there were a number of parish councils. Whilst the Council did not have any direct control over the workings of the parish councils, as they had their own budgets, aims for their parishes, it did have a role in terms of liaising with them. This was to ensure the parish councils were getting any support available from the Council and to ensure we worked in partnership to achieve the aims.

Member Development: He noted that for any member who wished to take advantage of training opportunities, for a specific role or to take up a specific role, there were lots of opportunities delivered by the Local Government Association (LGA).

Democratic Services: This team worked behind the scenes, putting together all of the meetings, ensuring members had everything they needed to enable the Council and members were able to function effectively.

Community Cohesion (supporting the Leader): This sat behind and alongside a lot of the threads within his and the Leaders role. Ensuring that the communities were working together, celebrating each other and learning from each other. One of the successes was the Rotherham Show, which had become much more of an event where different communities came together, supporting each other's cultures.

Social Inclusion Cultural Services, including libraries, neighbourhood hubs, heritage, theatre and arts along with all matters relating to Leisure Services (including recreation, sport and the Leisure PFI): Rotherham had an incredibly vibrant cultural sector. The Council had a fantastic relationship with Arts Council England, which was important as it enabled funding opportunities to deliver great events. It was also valued for the support, the experience, the advice that was shared to assist with how the Council delivered events, how to ensure everyone was included within the cultural offer, where possible. The libraries were a vibrant community hub.

A lot of work was being undertaken around the borough's rich heritage offer in places such as Keppel's Column, Wentworth Woodhouse, and Waterloo Kiln.

The Council worked very closely with the 4 main leisure centres across the borough, sport was seen as being part of culture and want to

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encourage as many people as possible to get involved as this promoted not only better physical health but better mental health as well.

Voluntary and Community Sector Liaison: The Council would not be able to achieve as much as it does without collaborating with partners. Working with the voluntary and community sector was a key element of this. The Council had a great relationship with Voluntary Action Rotherham, who worked, providing support with hundreds of groups, in terms of putting funding bids in.

Community Energy Scheme and tackling fuel poverty: As long as funding continues, this would provide support for the residents of Rotherham, who had seen unprecedented rises in the costs of fuel. Some of the Household Support Fund had been used to help tackle fuel poverty.

Development of an events programme in parks: The event at Clinton Park was incredible and positive feedback had been received. It was beneficial for local people to get involved in and it was great for the local economy. The Council would also continue working with partners to support the smaller local events.

Green Spaces and recreational facilities: A review of those spaces was being undertaken to understand them better, understand who used them and what could be done to improve that experience. Once the review was completed it could be presented to the Commission for consideration. Projects through the Levelling Up Fund for both Rother Valley and Thrybergh country parks were being progressed.

All matters relating to Allotments (including liaison with the Rotherham Allotment Alliance): The Rotherham Allotment Alliance was doing fantastic work in terms of managing the allotment sites. Some sites were at 100% occupancy with others above 80%. Through partnership work with Community Payback, the Rotherham Allotment Alliance had brought back decommissioned allotment sites into use. A lot of charities and other partner organisations used allotment sites to work with their clients.

The Food for People in Crisis Partnership, crisis loans schemes and development of the social supermarket and Advocacy and Appeals (and the Single Advice Model): Partnership in Place both with Voluntary Action Rotherham and with Citizens Advice Rotherham and Doncaster for providing extra help to people who were in crisis, particularly with food. The Council provided the top level for advocacy and appeals. He explained that Citizens Advice were moving back to a town centre location.

Regional Flood partnerships, Local Flood Authority duties, including town centre and other flood prevention investments and all matters relating to Highway Drainage (including septic tank and cesspool emptying): This was incredibly important and could be absolutely devastating if it happened. Flooding could be widespread or just affect a single home. A

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detailed report would be conducted for each instance of flooding, as to how the flood had happened, what could be done to rectify it in the future and any mitigating actions to be put in place.

Cemeteries, crematorium and mortuary services, including the Dignity Contract and the Registrars Service: The crematorium and most of the cemeteries were under contract with Dignity and it was about halfway through the contract. He worked with officers to ensure the contract was being fulfilled. It was hoped that a position could be reached in the future whereby fines to Dignity were not being issued because the contact was being fulfilled as set out. The Registrar's Service was an inhouse operation, for births, deaths, marriages, civil partnerships.

He highlighted that a Member Seminar on our Children's Capital of Culture would be scheduled, which would explain the journey so far, how the title Children's Capital of Culture was bestowed and what it would deliver not only in terms of events but also as a legacy moving forward.

The Chair informed the Commission that they would be receiving an update on Flood Alleviation at their September meeting.

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working explained he was in the fortunate position that he was able to devote a lot of time to his portfolio and to offer assistance to other portfolios.

Councillor Jones felt the Council was reliant on third sector organisations and supplier to bring events into the town centre. He found it was strange that there was no direct budget for town centre events. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working noted that budgets had been reduced. Whilst the Council didn't have a zero budget, it worked creatively within the cultural budget it had and it worked with partners for external funding bids, for example with Arts Council England, with Heritage Lottery Fund to bring in events. The Council was attracting great events into the town centre, which were free events.

Councillor Jones sought clarification if there was a budget specifically for town centre events. He understood that match funding needed to be put in for some events. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working indicated that there was not a specific budget line for that however the Council explored ways of being able to provide that funding where possible from within the existing sport and culture budgets. Sometimes that is in the form of providing barriers for events rather than actual funding. This process was also used for events in other localities as it was understood that not everyone wanted to travel into the town centre but that they wanted events in their community.

Councillor Havard expressed concerns that whilst library staff were reporting crimes to the library manager, that these were not being

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reported further. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working asked for details of the specific instance to be sent to him to be taken forward to ensure that all staff feel safe in their place of work.

Councillor Havard also mentioned that none of the ward information had been updated on the Citizens Advice Bureau website. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working indicated it would forward that information on.

Councillor Tinsley commented that Maltby was one of the biggest Town's and Villages schemes submitted however there had not been much movement with this project recently. He queried if any resources had been removed or other projects taking precedence to prohibit Maltby from progressing. He also asked if there was an option to combine funding from the Towns and Villages and Our Places fund to expand the project further. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working clarified that no resources had been diverted elsewhere. The Council was working to ensure the final schemes were completed as quickly as possible and as close to the original specifications as possible. He explained that the Our Places fund would work separately to the Towns and Villages fund.

The Chair queried if the cemeteries had enough space to meet the need going forward or was the Council looking to purchase additional space? The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working explained this was an area that the Council needed to ensure it was able to provide peace of mind for people and their relatives during that very emotive time. He attended a meeting recently that showed where the investments would be needed. He explained this would be one of his priorities to ensure that all localities had above a five-year minimum supply of spaces.

Councillor C Carter asked for further information about the Our Places fund and what the next steps would be and when consultation on this may begin. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working explained that this was very new, and it would expect it to be a few months away but when it was ready to be consulted upon, he offered to bring it back to the Improving Places Select Commission to be scrutinised.

Councillor Thorp indicated he had raised an issue through the members casework system regarding the planters and was told that it was the Parish who had responsibility for these rather than the Council through the Towns and Villages fund. The Stag where these were located did not have a Parish to run them so he queried how these would be maintained. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working believed that the planters would have been filled with low maintenance plants. He clarified that if the Council had placed the planter there, then it would be within the Council's remit to maintain it,

when needed.

Councillor Thorp asked if there was a regular schedule for highways drainage and gully cleaning on the housing estates? The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working explained the Council monitored when areas were last cleaned however the priority was to the main routes, but estate roads are included. Councillor Thorp noted that quite a few of the roads on the Grange estate have lots of trees, meaning these get clogged quicker than other areas. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working asked Councillor Thorp to let him know of any streets that needed to be cleaned and he would consult with the service to ensure they were cleaned.

The Chair noted he had recently had some casework regarding drainage and had found out that all sorts of things were being put down drains that should not be, such as two chairs. He asked if there was any form of training or leaflets that could be issued to households to aid their understanding of what was and was not suitable. He understood that there was a new IT system that had been put into the Highways team and drainage would be part of it. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working said he would need to seek further information regarding this system and if there was an issue in a particular area, the Council would look to provide information within that locality.

Resolved: That the Improving Places Select Commission:

1. Noted the overview of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion and Neighbourhood Working.
2. Agreed that consideration of the review into Green Spaces would be added to the work programme at the appropriate time.
3. Agreed that consideration of the Our Places Fund be added to the work programme at the appropriate time.
4. Agreed that information on the implementation of the new IT system in highways would be provided.

15. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that there were no urgent items of business requiring the Commission's consideration. He also advised Members that the next meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission would take place on the Tuesday 3 September 2024 commencing at 1.30pm in Rotherham Town Hall.