

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 8 July 2025

Present:- Councillor McKiernan (in the Chair); Councillors Allen, Beck, C. Carter, Jones, Rashid, Sheppard, Stables, Thorp and Tinsley.

Also in attendance were Mrs. K. Bacon and Mrs. M. Jacques, Rotherfed Co-optees.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Adair, Ahmed, Cowen, Jackson, Lelliott, Mault and Taylor.

The webcast of the Council Meeting can be viewed at:-
<https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

10. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 10 JUNE 2025

Resolved: That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 10 June 2025 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

11. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest to report.

12. 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.

13. 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.

14. TENANT SCRUTINY PANEL REVIEW - TENANCY HEALTH CHECK VISITS

At the Chair's invitation the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor Beresford introduced the report saying the review was conducted by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel as part of the Council's broader tenant engagement strategy. It aligns with one of the five outcomes in the Council Plan that is 'residents live well,' by ensuring tenants were supported and their needs were understood.

The Cabinet Member for Housing emphasised three key reasons why tenant engagement is important, these were:

1. Wellbeing checks: Visits allow the Council to check on tenants' welfare, identify changing needs, and uncover safeguarding concerns.

2. Customer voice: Tenants are customers, and the Council must have mechanisms to listen to them. The scrutiny panel is one such mechanism.
3. Regulatory compliance: Tenant engagement is a key metric for the Housing Ombudsman, who will assess the Council in the coming years.

The Cabinet Member for Housing went on to note that the Council was undergoing an independent review of its tenant engagement practices by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS), a national tenant engagement expert. Results would be shared with the Commission once available.

The Housing and Estate Services Manager highlighted the following points:

- Explained that the Tenant Scrutiny Panel had selected the Tenancy Health Check process for review in April 2024.
- The review focused on the following aspects:
 - The purpose and scope of the visits.
 - How visits were arranged and conducted.
 - Communication clarity and tenant understanding.
 - Effectiveness in identifying any support needs and safeguarding issues.
 - Consistency across the housing officers and localities.
 - Frequency of visits and whether the four-year cycle was appropriate.
 - Review of the questions asked during visits to ensure they were fit for purpose.
- The methodology used during the review included:
 - Tenant surveys.
 - Benchmarking against other housing providers.
 - Officer interviews.
 - Case studies.
- The key findings from the review were:
 - The term “Tenancy Health Check” was misleading; many tenants thought it referred to physical health.
 - The name was changed to “Your Tenancy Review” to better reflect the visit’s purpose.
 - Communication improvements were recommended (e.g. text/email reminders and clearer explanations of visit purpose.).
 - Inconsistencies in how visits were conducted across localities highlighted the need for:
 - Standardised training.
 - Oversight and quality control.
 - Support and advocacy mechanisms were found to be lacking for tenants with additional needs.
 - The current four-year visit cycle was deemed too rigid.

- A risk-based approach was recommended for more frequent visits where needed.
- Data handling concerns were raised, including the use of outdated or insensitive terminology.
- Progress and Next Steps
 - An action plan was developed in response to the panel's recommendations.
 - Most actions are already completed or underway.
 - The plan would be monitored by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel, with regular updates from officers.
 - A follow-up report will be presented to the Commission in 12 months to track progress.

The Chair invited members of the Improving Places Select Commission (IPSC) to raise questions and queries on the points raised earlier.

Councillor Thorp asked if there were plans to install solar panels on council housing to reduce emissions? The Cabinet Member for Housing said there were no current plans to install solar panels on all council homes due to cost, indicating the focus was on improving energy efficiency (e.g. boilers, insulation). She highlighted that new builds were highly efficient and gas-free.

In a follow up the Chair asked if energy efficiency was included as part of the tenancy checks? The Interim Assistant Director of Housing said it was part of the stock condition survey, not tenancy reviews, clarifying that the Council was using a “worst-first” approach with government grants to improve EPC ratings.

Councillor Sheppard asked how tenancy reviews supported new tenants early on, and queried if aids and adaptations were considered during reviews? The Cabinet Member for Housing indicated that pre-tenancy engagement included affordability, behaviour expectations, and support needs. She noted that tenancy reviews helped identify changes in needs over time (e.g. mobility issues, downsizing). IPSC Co-optee, Mrs. M. Jacques shared her personal experience of receiving a handrail after a review. The Project Officer clarified that aids and adaptations were part of the review form to ensure consistency. The Housing and Estate Services Manager explained that welcome visits occurred within 8 weeks of the tenancy starting and the reviews assessed suitability of the home and future needs (e.g. overcrowding, mobility).

During the discussions Councillor Jones asked if the Council was designing homes for “cradle to grave” communities? He queried if the ‘Every Contact Counts’ initiative was still promoted? He sought clarification on whether the review data was used for planning housing needs and were tenancy verification checks included? Lastly, he queried if a 4-year review cycle was sufficient.

The Cabinet Member for Housing responded that homes were not designed for all life stages, but to ensure that communities were mixed. She noted that downsizing when a tenant's needs changed was encouraged but not forced. She clarified that verification checks (e.g. NI numbers) were conducted to prevent fraud.

In response the Project Officer indicated that "Every Contact Counts" was still in use; nearly 2,000 referrals were made across various teams last year through the 'Your Tenancy Reviews'. It was noted that area housing officers managed 580 properties on average (above recommended average of 250–300), and workloads were under review.

The Housing and Estate Services Manager clarified that reviews were scheduled a minimum of every 4 years, but high-risk or vulnerable tenants may receive more frequent visits. In explaining the process followed it was indicated that visits were sometimes grouped by area for efficiency.

As part of the discussions Councillor Allen raised the following questions and comments. Councillor Allen felt the term "review" may sound formal or intimidating to tenants. It was asked if any enforcement actions had ever been undertaken? Clarification was sought as to whether other social landlords conducted similar reviews and if the Council was meeting the 4-year target? Lastly it was queried if officers could be shared across wards with different housing needs?

The Housing and Estate Services Manager explained that the name "Your Tenancy Review" had been selected by the tenants. It was clarified that enforcement action was taken if breaches (e.g. subletting) were found. In response to a further query, it was noted that access injunctions could be used if tenants refused entry, however officers preferred a more supportive approach.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Project Officer explained that most social landlords conducted similar reviews. About 75% of the properties have been reviewed within the 4-year cycle, with the cycle ending in Nov 2025. It was noted that the strategic housing forums and benchmarking data were used to compare practices.

The Interim Assistant Director of Housing explained that some of the properties missed in previous years were being revisited. These reviews helped identify hard-to-reach tenants and reclaim misused housing.

Councillor Stables suggested renaming the process to "Your Home Review" to sound more supportive. The Cabinet Member for Housing reiterated that the name was chosen by tenants, but a friendly strapline would be added to clarify the purpose.

The Vice-Chair noted that the "Guide to Your Home" was due to be updated and asked that a recommendation be that it was circulated to members when available? It was queried how flexible was the Council

when scheduling reviews, to ensure they fitted in with work commitments etc? The Vice-Chair noted there had been three different housing officers working within his ward over the past year and queried how workloads were managed with frequent staff changes, along with any knock-on effects such as building rapport with residents?

The Interim Assistant Director of Housing acknowledged that flexibility for the reviews and rapport with tenants was key and this would be taken on board when considering the future model of the housing service. It was clarified that the workloads of the housing officers varied by area and demand and IT improvements may help to increase efficiency. The Cabinet Member for Housing confirmed that appointments for reviews were flexible and rescheduled as needed.

Councillor Thorp asked what support was available for tenants who needed to move due to mental health or isolation? The Cabinet Member for Housing referred to the Housing Allocation Policy which included a medical priority (Priority 2). As part of the tenancy process officers tried to match tenants to the most suitable homes and offered auto bid support if needed. The Cabinet Member indicated that individual cases could be raised outside the meeting.

During discussions it was noted that the report did not include the performance information on the tenancy health checks and suggested that this information be included when the progress report was submitted to the IPSC in 12 months' time.

Resolved: That the Improving Places Select Commission:

1. Noted the outcome of the Tenant Scrutiny Review, the actions proposed to deal with each recommendation and progress to date.
2. Agreed that a further report detailing progress would be presented to Improving Places Select Commission in 12 months' time.
3. Agreed that the performance data would be included in the progress report being presented to Improving Places Select Commission in 12 months' time.
4. Agreed that the updated "Guide to Your Home" would be circulated to members when available.

15. IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION - WORK PROGRAMME 2025 - 2026

The Chair acknowledged that many members had submitted suggestions for the work programme via email, in response to Councillor Steele's communication. The Chair explained that the suggestions were still being reviewed and collated, which was why they were not yet included in Commissions work programme. The Chair confirmed that once reviewed, the suggestions would be brought back to the Commission for discussion.

The Governance Manager then introduced the work programme report and noted the following.

School Road Safety Review Update:

- A meeting had taken place with:
 - Councillors Cusworth, Williams, and Tinsley, the Interim Head of Transportation Infrastructure and the Assistant Director of Property and Facilities Services
- The meeting aimed to align the Commission's review with Cabinet's interest in the same topic.
- It was agreed that the Commission would continue its own review independently.
- Therefore, a new meeting of the working group would be convened to revisit the original motion and clarify the scope and direction of the review.
- The membership of the working group was to be reviewed as the previous members were Councillors Baggaley, Beck, Thorpe, Tinsley, and Stables. It was noted that Councillor Baggaley was no longer a member of the Commission.

At this point, Councillor Jones volunteered to join the group. Councillor Jones recommended involving a representative from SYMCA (South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority) in the review, since much of the funding for road safety work came from that body. The Chair agreed and said they would look into identifying a suitable contact.

The Chair expressed frustration that the Housing Strategy 2025–2028 was not ready for consideration as expected, noting that the delay was only communicated a few days before the agenda was due to be published.

Once the Housing Strategy 2025–2028 was ready for consideration the Chair proposed to hold an online workshop, potentially during August where officers would present the strategy and take questions. Any recommendations would be formally submitted for consideration at the September meeting.

The Chair explained that this was the preferred approach as the September meeting already had a full agenda, including Selective Licensing, which was expected to take significant time. Members agreed with the proposed approach and the Chair confirmed that members would receive an email to confirm availability for the online session.

Resolved: That the update on the Work Programme be received and noted.

16. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that there were no urgent items of business requiring the Commission's consideration.

Councillor Allen referred to an item listed for the upcoming 2 September

2025 IPSC meeting titled: “Plan for Neighbourhoods (Long Term Plan for Towns)”. Councillor Allen welcomed the inclusion of a place-based improvement item but expressed confusion over the terminology and queried if the focus was on “neighbourhoods” as currently defined by the Council or was it on “towns” such as Wath, Dinnington, Maltby, and Swinton?

Councillor Allen requested clarity on how this item fitted into the broader strategic planning framework and suggested that the Commission be shown how various regeneration and improvement plans (e.g. town centre masterplans, Our Places Fund) fitted together like a jigsaw. Councillor Allen also asked that the funding sources for each plan be included in the September presentation to help members understand the full picture.

The Strategic Director for Regeneration and Environment explained that the item’s dual title reflected a rebranding by central government, indicating that the original programme was called the “Long Term Plan for Towns”, and was launched in 2023. He noted that Rotherham was one of 75 towns awarded £20 million over 10 years for regeneration. The programme was paused in July 2024 following the general election and was relaunched in 2025 as the “Plan for Neighbourhoods”.

The Strategic Director for Regeneration and Environment noted that the scope remained the same: focused on town centres and surrounding areas. The Council needed to submit a spending proposal by November 2025, with Cabinet approval expected that month. The September IPSC meeting would be used to scrutinise the draft plan.

The Strategic Director for Regeneration and Environment agreed with Councillor Allen’s suggestion and committed to including:

- An opening slide showing how all regeneration programmes and funding streams fit together.
- A clear explanation of the strategic framework and funding sources.