

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 4 June 2024**

Present:- Councillor McKiernan (in the Chair); Councillors Ahmed, Baggaley, Beresford, Castledine-Dack, Havard, Jackson, Jones, Mault, Rashid, Thorp, Tinsley and Williams.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Adair, Beck and C. Carter.

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

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

1. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 19 MARCH 2024

Resolved: That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 19 March 2024 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. HOUSING STRATEGY 2022-25 PROGRESS REPORT YEAR 2 (2023-24)

The Chair welcomed James Clark, Assistant Director of Housing and Sarah Watts, Strategic Housing Manager to the meeting.

The Assistant Director of Housing provided an overview of his portfolio stating that he was responsible for the Council's landlord function, indicating the Council owned and managed around 20,000 council homes. He also managed the homelessness, housing needs and housing options services along with the housing development program. He noted that the private sector including licensing did not fall within his portfolio but explained that it was managed by Sam Barstow, Assistant Director of Community Safety and Street Scene.

He explained that the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor Allen had requested that a specific Member Development session be arranged to

cover all things related to housing to ensure Members knew how the service operated and how they could get in touch with them.

Assistant Director of Housing provided a recap of Rotherham's 30-year vision for housing, originally established in 2013. The Housing Strategy underwent a refresh every three years to ensure it aligned with current perspective. The vision aimed to create a comprehensive 30-year plan with clear objectives whilst maintaining the flexibility to adjust focus areas as circumstances evolved. The presentation covered an overview of the current housing strategy adopted in 2022, serving as the annual report to the committee.

The Assistant Director of Housing provided an update on the housing market in Rotherham, noting that it reflected national trends. Key points included the national housing shortage, with private rents rising faster than incomes, the loss of council homes due to the Right to Buy scheme, and the growing demand for housing with around 7,300 households on the council's housing register. As a result of all those pressures, homelessness had increased. He also highlighted that the regulatory framework for Rotherham as a landlord had changed significantly as of 1st April, requiring adherence to a proactive consumer regulation regime, including inspections by the national regulator. The previous commission had received updates on preparations for this regulation and inspection. The chair and members might have wanted to continue receiving these updates as part of the forward programme for the current commission.

He focused on Priority 1 - High quality new homes of the Housing Strategy and highlighted the progress made:

- At the beginning of 2023/24 new homes in the Town Centre were completed and almost fully occupied. This had a positive impact on businesses as it increased the number of residents in the Town Centre, thereby boosting footfall and benefiting local businesses.
- The Town Centre development was the largest single council build scheme undertaken in decades, providing valuable lessons in both the technical aspects of construction and the sensitive integration and support of new residents.
- The Council committed to strengthening its partnership with Homes England and the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) to secure funding for delivering more homes. This includes obtaining affordable housing grants, with the first tranche expected imminently under the new housing program.
- The Council aimed to complete a zero-carbon prototype project at Thrybergh but did not achieve this due to the high costs not representing good value for money. However, they completed 10 homes at East Herringthorpe using the same zero-carbon prototype technology.
- Other notable achievements for the year included adding the 500th new council home to the housing stock and completing 217 new homes.

Further, he focused on Priority 2 – Affordable housing to meet local need of the Housing Strategy and highlighted the progress made:

- The Council facilitated the delivery of 237 homes at Chesterhill and Whinney Hill, which was a sanctuary and great places scheme that was enabled by the council on land it originally owned. The Council provided continuous support throughout the process, which had been completed and the houses were almost fully occupied. The development was praised for its quality and was viewed as a fantastic addition to the area.
- The Annual Developer Summit commitment to be made every year was put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there was now a renewed commitment to hold the summit this year without fail. These summits had proven particularly beneficial for smaller and medium businesses interested in supporting our new-build program. These informal summits provided a valuable opportunity for businesses to directly communicate with officers. This dialogue was not only valuable for them but also for the council, as their participation in bidding for our contracts was encouraged.
- This year Council initiated the practice of purchasing homes on the open market when previously had been acquiring new-build homes from developers. Two or three acquisitions had already been completed. Often, these homes had been under the Right to Buy scheme, so we were already familiar with the properties. From a management perspective, this approach made sense as it provided a way to mitigate the loss of housing stock resulting from the continued Right to Buy policy.
- The Government funding was secured to bring 14 homes into use, specifically for younger homeless people. The Council had a cohort of residents in the borough who tended to be younger and often had complex needs, making them more prone to homelessness. It was an area where the Council wanted to ensure it had more housing stock specific to that group available to alleviate their homelessness.

The Assistant Director of Housing focused on Priority 3 – Investing in existing homes of the Housing Strategy and highlighted that the Council had committed to responding to and implementing the requirements of the Social Housing White Paper. Since that commitment was made, there had been a whole raft of new changes in regulations for the Council as a social landlord, which it had been getting to grips with.

He also added that another impending change was the introduction of new standards and qualification requirements for housing staff and landlords, which were not currently in place. Additionally, a new inspection regime for landlords had been implemented, and the Council would be inspected as a large landlord at some point in the next few years.

Further, he highlighted the progress made on Priority 4 - Bringing empty homes back into use of the Housing Strategy.

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- The Council was committed to bringing empty homes back into use and to refresh the empty homes plan which was in the process of being done. As part of this year's budget a decision was taken to make the empty homes officer a permanent position to avoid issues with the lack of internal resources. This change dedicated more effort to refreshing the plan.
- In terms of statistics Assistant Director of Housing highlighted that 33 empty homes were brought back into use this year. Anyone with empty properties in their wards knew that even one such property could significantly impact the area, attracting antisocial behaviour and diminishing pride in the community.
- Additionally, regarding council stock, the Council had managed to reduce re-let time from 40 days two years ago to an average of 25 days last year. This reduction was a significant achievement as it allowed to turn over the stock more quickly and generate more income by renting out properties, which was beneficial for the health of the housing business plan.

The Assistant Director of Housing summarised the progress made on Priority 5 - Supporting people to live independently of the Housing Strategy.

He explained that the Council committed to addressing the needs of homeless households and completed a refresh of the homelessness strategy, which was adopted by the Cabinet in April 2023. Additionally, the Council committed to reviewing its approach to aids and adaptations, resulting in a complete rewrite of the policy, which was adopted in December 2023. He also emphasised that seven new accessible homes were completed, 1,381 council properties were let, also 810 major and 5,000 minor adaptations had been made.

The update on the last Priority 6 - Strengthening communities of the Housing Strategy consisted of a commitment to strengthening communities, with a particular focus on engaging with tenants. The Housing Strategy emphasised continuing the support program in this regard. It should be noted that this area was heavily focused on by the housing regulator, who wanted to understand how our service was delivered and the decisions made by the Council and officers were rooted in the desires of our tenants and customers regarding their housing stock. This focus remained prominent at the time.

The Assistant Director of Housing provided an overview of the next year's Housing Strategy. The Council remained committed to an ambitious development and acquisition program to increase the size of the housing stock. Ensuring completion of outcomes reports for all new developments was prioritised, with a focus on learning from past experiences. Joint work with Homes England was mentioned, along with targeted engagement with private developers and housing associations to influence the availability of affordable homes in the borough. Preparation for a potential inspection by the regulator was ongoing, and funding was authorised by the Council to commence a program of stock condition surveys. These

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surveys aimed to provide information for refreshing the asset management strategy and determining investment needs in the housing stock.

He informed that the investment strategy for retrofitting our homes and sought to strengthen assurance regarding the Council's compliance with property requirements, including gas safety, asbestos, and fire safety started its development. A big review of the allocations policy was initiated to address the high demand for council properties. The next phase of the homelessness strategy was also implemented. Consultation on the new strategy was commenced during the calendar year, with the aim of finalising it for early implementation the following year.

Mrs. K. Booth sought clarification on whether the inspection bit applied to private landlords. The Assistant Director of Housing explained that the inspections applied to all social landlords with more than a thousand properties, which included local authorities with more than a thousand homes and many housing associations operating in the Borough with more than two thousand homes. However, there was no equivalent regime for private landlords.

Councillor Jones highlighted his experience reviewing some unused garage sites and considering them for housing development. He noted that about six sites were identified in his ward, with one designed for bungalows, which were in high demand in Rotherham West. He asked for an update on the progress, mentioning that only one previous school site had been used, despite having at least three school sites and three garage sites available. He also enquired about the status of using modular accommodation that could be relocated around the borough based on changing supply and demand, noting that this initiative seemed to have gone quiet.

The Assistant Director of Housing explained that he was aware of at least three or four developments involving annexed garage sites that had either been completed or were in the pipeline. He described a rolling review process for garage sites, where sites that became vacant or fell into disrepair were evaluated for the best use. This could involve managing them as open space, including them in the development program for assessment, or disposing of the site, sometimes selling it to neighbouring homeowners to extend their gardens. He assured that garage sites were constantly being reviewed and added to the development program. He noted that these sites were often challenging due to community views and planning process difficulties, but they were valuable as the Council already owned them, they were not being used, and they had a manageable impact on infrastructure and services.

Regarding modular accommodation, he mentioned the East Herringthorpe scheme, which used modular timber frames built off-site and erected on-site, allowing for faster completion than traditional builds. However, he noted that modular construction was still more expensive than traditional

methods due to the lack of scale. He indicated that if there were national purchases for thousands of units, costs would likely decrease, but for now, the Council was purchasing a relatively small number.

Councillor Havard sought clarification on a case from her ward about an elderly lady who had damp-proofed her property. Half of the property had been pulled out, rendered, and plastered, leaving her struggling to recover from the extensive work and decoration needed. The Councillor enquired about future support for people in similar conditions who are living alone and facing challenges in managing the aftermath of such repairs.

The Assistant Director of Housing explained the Council's current policy, which offers a £25 decorating voucher, an amount agreed upon many years ago. He acknowledged that this amount was insufficient for today's needs, especially given the increased number of properties undergoing damp-proofing. While it was positive that more residents are reporting damp issues, it raised concerns about the adequacy of support provided.

He informed Councillor Havard that a new repairs and maintenance policy was on the forward plan for Cabinet, with a decision expected later this year. One of the key questions to be addressed is the appropriate level of support, both financial and otherwise, for residents needing to redecorate after repairs. He noted the trade-off involved, as increasing financial compensation would impact the overall budget and other priorities. However, he fully accepted the point raised by the Councillor.

Councillor Williams highlighted that garage sites presented a valuable opportunity for developing new council homes, particularly bungalows, which are in high demand. He expressed interest in receiving further information on this matter. Additionally, he enquired about the trend in Right to Buy sales, noting that there had been a drop and asked whether this was a one-off trend or part of a longer-term pattern observed over recent years.

The Assistant Director of Housing clarified that the number of Right to Buy sales in 2023/24 was 148/141, compared to around 220 the previous year and a similar number the year before. He noted that two main factors seemed to influence Right to Buy sales: the nationally set discount, which the government changed several years ago leading to a significant increase in sales, and interest rates, which affect the overall housing market. The recent issues in the mortgage market and challenges with interest rates also contributed to the decrease in sales. He indicated it was too early to determine if this trend represented a long-term shift. Even with the lower sales rate, the Council struggles to replace the number of homes sold, partly due to the volume and specific rules on how the proceeds from Right to Buy sales can be used, making it challenging to keep up with the loss of stock.

Councillor Tinsley enquired about the strategy for open market or street house acquisitions, specifically regarding the re-purchase of Right to Buy

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houses. He noted that councils like Doncaster have added to their housing stock by buying these street properties. The Councillor emphasised that such a strategy could have broader benefits, particularly in selective licensing areas, by improving the overall estate through tenancy management and support packages, thus enhancing the community beyond merely increasing the number of council houses.

The Assistant Director of Housing explained that the Council was committed to acquiring 100 properties over two years as part of their acquisitions policy, recently approved by the Cabinet. Although still in the early stages, the Council had allocated a budget and was serious about this goal. He acknowledged that neighbouring authorities like Doncaster were ahead in acquisitions, while Rotherham had focused more on new builds. The strategy aimed to balance both approaches, recognising that acquisitions were quicker and often cheaper than constructing new homes.

The Chair sought clarification on the 20 million in social value activity, asking how that figure was determined. Additionally, the Chair inquired about the time taken to prepare for inspections and whether this preparation had any impact on the budget, considering the new requirements being implemented.

The Assistant Director of Housing responded that a written response would be provided regarding the first question concerning the 20 million in social value activity. Regarding the second question, he confirmed that preparing for inspections took a considerable amount of time and incurred significant costs. He explained that the emphasis in the regulations was on being able to provide evidence for all actions taken, which may require investments in systems, IT infrastructure, performance and reporting approaches, and contract monitoring. These enhancements increase the base costs of running a landlord. He noted that all landlords were facing similar challenges. Additionally, if new laws were implemented as planned, they may specify quicker response times for certain types of repairs, further impacting costs.

Councillor Havard enquired about housing staff acquiring more certifications, particularly to identify individuals in need of support. She specifically asked whether staff would receive training in identifying mental health issues and similar concerns. Additionally, she sought an update on the health checks mentioned in a previous meeting, where housing officers were tasked with visiting and checking on residents, and how data collection was progressing in this regard.

The Assistant Director of Housing clarified that the government's consultation was primarily focused on social housing managers obtaining housing qualifications. However, the Council has its own training program for staff, which includes relevant topics such as communication skills for interacting with individuals with autism. Regarding the second question, he explained that the Council was committed to conducting tenancy

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health checks at each property at least once every four years. These checks involve in-depth conversations with tenants, lasting around three to four hours. He noted that the Council made significant progress in conducting these checks last year.

Resolved:

1. That progress against the Housing Strategy priorities was noted.
2. Improving Places Select Commission would receive a final progress report at the end of the strategy period, as part of the consultation for the new Housing Strategy, which should be complete during Spring 2025.
3. That a list of garage sites in development would be provided for members
4. To review the new repairs and maintenance policy before it was considered by the Cabinet.
5. Further information would be provided on the breakdown of the £20 million Social Value expenditure to members of the Improving Places Select Commission.

6. NOMINATE REPRESENTATIVE TO THE HEALTH, WELFARE AND SAFETY PANEL

The Chair sought a representative from the Improving Places Select Commission to sit as a member of the Health, Welfare and Safety Panel. Councillor Tinsley volunteered to be the representative for 2024/25.

Resolved: That the Improving Places Selection Commission appointed Councillor Adam Tinsley as its representative on the Health, Welfare and Safety Panel for 2024/25.

7. IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION - WORK PROGRAMME 2024 - 2025

Consideration was given to a draft outline programme of scrutiny work for the 2024-2025 municipal year.

The topic of Grounds Maintenance was put forward for scrutiny, in relation to the Council's ability to maintain grass cutting and weeding at some of its cemetery sites. Concern was expressed that this team was under resourced to manage its programme of activity.

Following on from the Selective Licensing Review last year, an update was requested on progress made with the HHSRS inspections, to be provided in the form of an off-agenda briefing.

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It was clarified that the Scrutiny Review Recommendations – Nature Recovery were being presented to Cabinet and would be brought back to the Commission once Cabinet had provided a response to those recommendations.

It was also suggested that the Commission may wish to consider a review of the Small Road Safety Scheme.

Resolved: That the Improving Places Select Commission:

1. Noted the outline work programme for 2024-2025.
2. Agreed that consideration would be given to shortlisting the following topics:
 - a. Grounds Maintenance.
 - b. Small Road Safety Scheme.
3. Agreed that an off-agenda briefing be requested to set out progress made with the HHSRS inspections following the Selective Licensing Review conducted last year.

8. URGENT BUSINESS

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