

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 10 June 2025**

Present:- Councillor McKiernan (in the Chair); Councillors Ahmed, Allen, Beck, Castledine-Dack, Jackson, Jones, Lelliott, Mault, 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, C. Carter and Taylor.

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 18 MARCH 2025

Resolved:- That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 18th March, 2025 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings and signed by the Chair.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Allen declared a personal interest in Minute No. 64 (Housing Strategy 2022-25 Final Progress Report) on the grounds of being the former Cabinet Member for Housing.

Councillor Sheppard declared a personal interest in Minute No. 62 (Independent Equalities Review of Bereavement Services Provision) on the grounds of being the former Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member involved.

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. INDEPENDENT EQUALITIES REVIEW OF BEREAVEMENT SERVICES PROVISION

Consideration was given to the Independent Equalities Review of Bereavement Services Provision presented by the Monitoring Officer, which was commissioned to assess the end-to-end bereavement support and burial services for the Muslim community in Rotherham, thus

encompassing the roles of statutory and community voluntary agencies before, during, and after bereavement.

Kaushar Tai, the specialist consultant commissioned to carry out the review, was asked to identify the need to learn from examples of good practice, explore areas for improvement and make key recommendations across all areas of services in Rotherham to ensure good practice was implemented wherever possible and practical to do so.

This report addressed each of the proposed recommendations highlighted within the review and provided a position statement on the current situation with these across the board.

The Chair invited Kaushar Tai to report his findings and in doing so he confirmed he had consulted with communities and bereavement services to review current practices with particular emphasis on Muslim burials within twenty-four hours and comparisons with other religious practices.

Positive feedback from stakeholders had been received including from medical examiners, coroners, staff, bereavement services, mosques, and communities.

It was suggested that as part of the improvements in the process just simplifying requirements, streamlining processes with co-working and joined up working would be beneficial. In addition, this would enhance and accommodate religious timelines especially with Muslim burials taking place without delay. This was compromised with the new medical examiner requirements of a further check and whilst this was a legal requirement adherence would allow for the peaceful departure of the soul. Not only did this help with the bereavement process, but assist with those wishing to mourn.

The report considered how best to address bottlenecks in the system and looked at flexible G.P. and medical examiner appointments and pathways.

Whilst training did take place there needed to be some competency training in bereavement services in other aspects, with improvements to staff recognising efforts, encouraging dialogue, building trust and co-operation and also adhering to Equalities Act 2010.

In addition, the need for full access to disabled and fair crisis centres was needed to prevent discrimination, protect characteristics and to coincide with reasonable accommodation outside normal hours to align to inclusivity.

Respect for faith burials was important, provide dignity for traditions and, therefore, strengthen community trust.

The review also considered details about burial sites, headstone restoration, locating and relocating missing headstones, ongoing work

around digital mapping of graves consistency in the size of the grave and separation distances.

There was also a need to ensure clean maintenance around gravestones, active land allocation for future burials, appropriate spacing between graves, construction of pathways to ensure disabled access and taps for washing.

There was a need for exploration in community led burial practices to ensure consistency with appropriate commissioning from those involved. It was suggested that there be uniformity in burial practices with some bench installations and to take into account Muslim visitation practices with car park provision to be managed. This integrated partnership and collaborative work would promote clear communication and referral pathways.

A discussion and question and answer session ensued where the following were raised:-

- Post mortems and use of digital autopsy, which was reported to be working well and a less invasive procedure, therefore, helping with timescales.
- The need for collaborative EDI training and shared learning.
- Action planning production and monitoring of the report recommendations and how this would coincide with the annual report on Bereavement Services in December. Rotherham was also highlighted as an outlier for its communication with community members.
- Drawing comparison with other Local Authorities Rotherham was on a par and was providing good integration with policy production of which there were several. Consideration was being given to hosting all relevant documentation in one place with clear signposting to relevant services.
- The key improvement recommendations highlighted on Page 18 were relevant a number of agencies and the term used generically.
- The out of hours service running at an extra hour a day was to be increased following feedback and demand.
- Enforcement action remained ongoing and negotiations with Dignity were robust and continuing.
- The report set out clearly Rotherham had sufficient space for Muslim burials.
- It may be effective to consult with other religions to ensure consistency. And secure improvements across the board.
- Numbers of religious burials each year data to be provided.
- Consideration of moving maintenance schedules to later in the day to avoid early morning dew, whilst being mindful of the impact/disruption to those requiring reflection.
- Provision of bench seating alongside sponsored provision and for this to be kept under review.

- Informative documentation and education on sensitive burial practices and consideration of sharing some detail via neighbourhood bulletins.
- Restrictions and permissions for headstone restoration.
- Funding for stonework reinstatement and the need for discreet and sensitive improvements.
- Costs associated with burials and the additional religious requirements set out via legislation.
- Burial capacity and land acquisition. The Council would ensure sufficient land was available.
- The Council would not be responsible should arrangements be sought with private cemeteries.
- Rolling out toileting provision at other cemeteries and the capital investment that would be required to fund such a provision.

Resolved:- (1) That the Independent Equalities Review of Bereavement Services Provision be received and the contents noted.

(2) That Officers produce an action plan to track the Council's progress in relation to actions against the Independent Report and that this be brought back to the Improving Places Select Commission to accompany the Bereavement Services Annual report.

(3) That data be provided on the number of religious burials each year.

(4) That an article be included in the Neighbourhood newsletter about general burial processes.

6. ROTHERHAM EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS STRATEGY

Consideration was given to the Rotherham Employment and Skills Strategy and the Chair invited the Cabinet Member Councillor Williams to introduce and in doing so he acknowledged the work going on behind the scenes and the research analysis taking place to inform the strategy.

The Strategy, therefore, provided a vision for employment and skills to help residents prosper and businesses succeed. In addition, it provided a framework for actions over the next five years and aligned with regional and national focus on employment for a skilled workforce.

This Strategy supported the local economy, promoted inclusivity and its education/training would be responsive to the job market. Its successful delivery was by way of collaboration with partners and included residents. The Strategy's progress delivery would be monitored, prosper growth and work would remain ongoing with partners.

Simon Moss, Assistant Director, Planning, Regeneration and Transport (by way of Powerpoint) gave a presentation to highlight the Strategy's:-

- Aims and Objectives.
- Strategic Context.
- Approach.
- Implications Review 1.
- Implications Review 2.
- Implications Review 3.
- Proposed Missions.
- Strategic Framework.
- Intervention Areas.
- Implementation Plan.
- Draft Actions.
- Various Appendices.

A discussion and answer session ensued and the following issues were raised and clarified:-

- Mention of several areas of high deprivation, emphasising the need to target all areas, not just specific ones. Discussions were taking place on potential links to different approaches.
- Ongoing conversations about working with CYPS, academies, and resources to assist with those not in education, employment or training. Pathways were highlighted to work and collaborate with the voluntary and community sector to engage parts of the community not otherwise engaged with the Council. There were aspirations to align with families in poverty, with plans for a workshop to address this. Better understanding would be emphasised to target individuals through pathways to work.
- Engagement with the voluntary and community sector through Voluntary Action Rotherham, but how would it ensure this would be captured. Officers reported this would be done through a number of contracts through pathways to work and learning through the multiple programme engagements through voluntary and community sector.
- How could aspirations be raised through retaining, offering opportunities and enable training access. It was reported the provision was focused on getting people back to work. The advanced programme would provide support and upskilling opportunities for people in work through the Employment Solutions Team. The third mission of the Strategy was to enhance better signposting.
- Could there be more upskilling by offering more evening or weekend courses. Officers recognised the need for flexibility for people already in work. For those who were carers who needed the flexibility the pathways to work programme would minimise

duplication and ensure this provision was signposted clearly.

- Different levels of inactivity were reported in ethnic minorities and highest was there a reason for this. It was reported deep dive activity was looking into the reasons to understand through pathways to work. Work was going with people to understand and how to address/resolve these problems.
- How were barriers for access being overcome for learning jobs. Officers confirmed programmes were taking place with employers to work with skills banks to upskill and enhance capability of their workforce. Working in right way would support business and individuals.
- Working with various stakeholders and relationships with other partners, but to what degree had they been involved in this strategy. It was reported there had been a huge amount of work with partners. The Employment and Skills Board had partners engaged in the pathways programmes and have effective governance in place to facilitate the collaboration needed. Sub- groups to the Board provided opportunities, information and a level of activity. It was very much Rotherham's Strategy with collaboration from SYMCA and the DWP and other partners.
- The final Strategy was helpful and the connections could be seen, but Voluntary Action Rotherham was not the only organisation that could provide connectivity. Officers were more than happy to liaise with other organisations.
- There was recognition for NEETS, but if young people were not in school what mechanisms were in place to access was available. On this basis perhaps this Strategy also needed to be shared with the Improving Lives Selection Commission. NEETS work was being done with schools to identify and picking up on data about absences and any other indicators. Sharing the Strategy with other Commissions was welcomed.
- Despite the increase in development apprenticeship levels were low so what action was being taken with companies in say the construction industry to address this. It was reported one of three missions focused on higher skills. It was important to have higher end focus and address at a basic level so access into manual jobs was available. RNN were taking a lead but more could be done and actions were being taken seriously and reflected.
- In terms of the Strategy did employers indicate what they needed. Officers confirmed they were working with the Chamber of Commerce and DWP as routes to develop any opportunities.

- What apprenticeship programmes were available across partnerships and the Council. It was reported there was an extensive established apprenticeship programme and there was a corporate drive to increase the offer.
- With all the initiatives, collaboration and signposting how was the Council involved. Officers confirmed large employers were really important to deliver the Strategy and the Council was taking a lead role. Work was taking place through a particular strand and there was an assistance programme for growth acceleration via the NHS. It was important to have themed outcomes and supply chains to encourage local employment with local training opportunities and planning policies to support the work taking place.
- Was there any links to young people who were elective home educated. This was an area Improving Lives had looked at so may need lines of enquiry to be followed up.

Resolved:- That the presentation and the information be received and the contents noted.

7. HOUSING STRATEGY 2022-25 FINAL PROGRESS REPORT

Consideration was given to the Housing Strategy 2022-25 which was approved by Cabinet in June 2022 and published in July 2022.

The Chair invited Councillor Beresford, Cabinet Member, to introduce where it was highlighted the Strategy recognised the key issues affecting housing in Rotherham and the impact these have on residents. It set out how the Council would work in partnership to address the priorities identified.

The Housing Strategy was being refreshed, subject to Cabinet approval towards the end of the year. This report was presented for information and provided a final position statement for the three-year strategy period between April 2022 – March 2025 and was presented to this Commission annually.

The thirty year vision was set to provide high quality homes and this Council wanted to be the best provider to reduce the gap for healthy and vibrant communities. This would ensure people were living in energy efficient homes, would revitalise the town centre and provide a real community of living.

Sarah Watts, Strategic Housing Manager, delivered a presentation via Powerpoint which highlighted:-

- The thirty year vision.
- Local Context.

- Six key priorities for the 22-25 period:-
 - ❖ High quality new homes.
 - ❖ Affordable homes to meet local need.
 - ❖ Investing in existing homes.
 - ❖ Bringing empty homes back into use.
 - ❖ Supporting people to live independently.
 - ❖ Strengthening communities.
- Achievements against each of the six priorities.
- Housing Strategy Next Steps.

A discussion and question and answer session ensued and the following issues were raised and clarified:-

- There had been tremendous work done with incredible achievements and Members were proud how this had moved on. What were the biggest challenges to achieving those policy areas and what had been the learning from this that would shape the future. Officers confirmed the development programme was an ongoing challenge as it was ambitious with the delivery of homes in the current climate, with increases and the need to weigh up value for money in the building of high quality homes. The sector was under scrutiny from the Regulator of Social Housing, so it was a balance between providing the new homes needed and the need to invest in existing homes, whilst still losing stock via Right To Buy for the investment into existing homes.

The Social Housing Regulation Act was a real challenge with HRA investment going into making homes safe. There was only so much funding available. The Regulator expectations were high and the Council would be subject to inspection in the next few years.

- How many new homes had been built in the last three years but then bought through the Right To Buy Scheme. Officers did not have this figure to hand and would provide this in writing.
- Clarification was sought and provided on banning orders and how Cabinet approved the policy in 2022 giving the Enforcement Team the tools for persistent offenders when all other actions had failed.
- Empty homes enforcement tools were available, what were these. It was reported these were enforcement tools against non-compliant owners and landlords and were a last resort for things such as compulsory purchase or working being undertaken and recharged back.
- Output and achievements had increased overall with a programme of support for tenants and residents. This had seen 581 accredited training and helping others into employment. Was this done by

Housing or part of the Employment Solutions Team. It was noted this was historically Employment Solutions, but this had now moved under another portfolio.

- Over the past three years had anything been included about housing complaints about stock and would this be included going forward. Officers confirmed this was not part of the Strategy. Complaints related to day-to-day operations and were monitored through Housing SMT's to ensure complaints were dealt with effectively.

Complaints monitored and overseen on a monthly basis. The Annual Tenant Satisfaction Survey measured feedback and is regulated and the Housing Ombudsman monitored performance. There had been nothing over the last three years, but it remained challenging in dealing with higher expectation and problems being encountered. Complaints were also monitored and shared with the Cabinet Member.

- Following consultation was there anything in the current Strategy that was surprising or that would continue into the new Strategy. It was reported consultation was based on looking at the six themes, to check if they were relevant and if there was any different emphasis. Priorities remained similar in that there was a need for more affordable homes, options and opportunities and housing that met need. The new Strategy provided different emphasis on the priorities and the proposal was for four priority areas rather than the six. This would aid to balance investing in new and existing homes and ensure the balance was right. The key was to working effectively with partners and other stakeholders.
- During the consultation process was there any change with the change of Government and funding. Officers confirmed work would continue with SYMCA and Homes England to ensure a good evidence base and be able to move quickly when investment was available. Much of the funding was from the HRA generated from tenants which was used to reinvest and ensure housing need was met.

The new business plan had followed due process and through new standards the Council would need to see how efficient the HRA was and in the collection of rents. Priorities would be presented to Members in terms of improvements and new build and investment into the assets.

- With the development of thirty-two bungalows was there an opportunity to go out to the market to find developments who could building specific developments especially with the lack of certain provision. One of the barriers was people moving into a smaller property and having to move out of their support network. Could the Council look to build more bungalows. Officers confirmed this was

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factored into development programmes, but bungalows were land hungry. Demand had to be balanced with the need for family housing too.

- Housing development in the town centre, had consideration been given to the development of the Howard Building which would easily lend itself to apartments. It was noted the Howard Building was in private ownership and some enforcement for clean up had been in force. The next phases for regeneration for the town centre would look at all opportunities available, including bring buildings back into use.
- Where housing schemes had stalled where land was available for housing had an outline application been submitted when there was borough wide opposition by local residents. If the work developing green spaces was causing that much backlash how would this affect the Council moving forward. It was noted that the Council had a requirement for new homes and whilst there was some local resistance sites like Bassingthorpe Farm would take into account type and infrastructure links.

It was also noted a new supplementary planning document was due to be presented to the Cabinet in September for approval which set the framework for the detailed assessment. Regular conversations were taking place with Fitzwilliam Estates and it was about all working together to bring the site forward.

With the experimental homes was there any missed opportunities that did not go forward. Officers confirmed there was talk of a community led housing project in Eastwood. This did get started with two properties with an exemplar landlord which eventually was developed as social housing and was Government funded. The second phase was not supported, but where there was an opportunity to discuss further this would be investigated.

Resolved:- (1) That progress against the Housing Strategy priorities be received and noted.

(2) That the Improving Places Select Commission continue to receive annual progress reports for the Housing Strategy.

(3) That data be provided on new housing properties bought through the Right to Buy Scheme.

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

The Governance Manager introduced the work programme report and highlighted how Councillor Steele, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board, would be emailing out requesting items for future

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work for incorporation into this year's work programme.

It was also noted that two workshops were ongoing; one on the Water Bylaws and the other School Road Safety. Anyone wishing to join these review groups should contact the Governance Manager.

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

9. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that there were no urgent items of business requiring the Commission's consideration other than nomination for a member of the Health, Welfare and Safety Panel.

Resolved:- That Councillor Tinsley be appointed as the Improving Places Select Commission's representative for 2025/26.