

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL
11th March, 2010

Present:- Councillor McNeely (in the Chair); Councillors Atkin, Blair, Cutts, Havenhand, Lakin, Nightingale, P. A. Russell, Walker and F. Wright. together with Alex Armitage (Parish Councils), Bernadette Bartholomew (Parish Councils), Mr. J. Carr (Environment Protection UK), Derek Corkell (RotherFed) and Andrew Roddison (RotherFed).

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Hodgkiss.

76. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest made at the meeting.

77. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

A member of the public asked the Panel to acknowledge the existence of the Rotherham Older Person's Forum which had been set up recently to refresh the Older Person's Strategy and Action Plan. Councillor Walker was a member of both the Forum and the Scrutiny Panel.

It may be appropriate to invite members of the Forum to the Panel when issues such as the Under Occupation Policy were being discussed in order to gain their opinions and input and vice versa.

It was also suggested that in the new Municipal Year an approach could be made to the Forum to ascertain if they wished to nominate a representative to become a co-opted member onto the Panel.

78. COMMUNICATIONS

There was nothing to report.

79. AIR QUALITY MANAGEMENT AREAS

In accordance with Minute No. 67 of the Panel held on 28th January, 2010, Lewis Coates, Community Protection Manager, presented the above update.

Section 83 of the Environment Act required a local authority, for any area where air quality standards were not being met, to issue an Order designating it an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). It was proposed that the area covered by the existing M1 AQMA be extended to include areas of Blackburn that were in proximity to the M1.

Although air quality was cleaner than at any time since the industrial revolution, air pollution was not declining as quickly as previously expected. The proposed extension of the M1 would inevitably have a negative effect upon air quality in Rotherham.

The Council's Community Protection Unit had been consulted by the Highways Agency regarding the proposal to widen the M1 motorway between junctions 35 and 32 through Rotherham. The proposal was to increase highway capacity as a managed motorway to 4 lanes at peak times with no extra land taken. This would result in vehicles being closer to the residential properties of Blackburn, Meadowbank and Brinsworth. Mitigation measures could include variable speed limits. The impact on air quality was being assessed by consultants on behalf of the Highways Agency as part of their Environmental Assessment.

A Detailed Assessment of the air quality in Blackburn close to the M1, adjacent to the M1 AQMA was submitted to DEFRA in July, 2009. It was unlikely that areas of Blackburn where residents were exposed to levels of Nitrogen Dioxide above the Air Quality Objective Levels, would meet the Air Quality Objectives. Consequently, the Council was statutorily obliged to declare an AQMA.

It was proposed that the AQMA should be extended to include:-

"From the boundary of the existing Air Quality Management Area which follows the line of Droppingwell Road follow Baring Road to the junction with Barber Wood Road, due north from Barber Wood Road to the line of the dismantled railway line, follow the route of the dismantled railway line to the north west to the edge of the M1 motorway. From there, follow the edge of the M1 motorway due south east to New Droppingwell Road"

It was also noted that a Detailed Assessment of Air Quality for the Parkgate area near to the A633 had been completed in April, 2009, and accepted in full by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. A Detailed Assessment for the pollutant fine particulates (24- hour PM_{10}) in the area of St. Ann's alongside the A630 was due for submission to DEFRA in April, 2010.

Discussion ensued on the report with the following issues highlighted;-

- The Government Guidance that by 2020 $PM_{2.5}$ would have to be measured. Work had started on plans to address this

- The 4 local authorities, South Yorkshire Passenger Transport, Highways Agency and Primary Care Trust all worked together. An example of joint working was the "Care for Air" initiative
- The transport corridor at Dalton was not causing any concern for action at present
- The main contributory factor to the problem at Parkgate was public transport
- In the last 2 years there had been a decline in the level of pollutants but the M1 corridors relied heavily on National initiatives
- The traffic lights being used on the M1 at the bottom of the slip road reduced the speed of traffic and the amount going onto the highway at any 1 time.
- There were no figures available as yet as to whether the Government Car Scrappage Scheme had made a difference
- The Unit had carried out a lot of work on the Waverley proposals. A meeting had taken place with the developer to discuss measures to be put in place to measure air quality which would be at the expense of the developer. The process proposed by the developer had been factored into the Plan for the monitoring around the site throughout the lifetime of the development

Resolved:- That the report be noted.

80. 2010 ROTHERHAM LTD. IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Director of Housing and Neighbourhood Services presented the first quarterly monitoring report for the 2010 Rotherham Ltd. Improvement Plan which covered Quarter 3 (October-December, 2009).

Of the 62 actions within the Improvement Plan:-

- 12 actions had been completed in or ahead of time
- 33 actions were progressing in line with timescales
- 10 actions were progressing but with some concern for timescale
- 7 actions were behind schedule.

In general, the main reason for failure against the targets appeared

to have been unrealistic dates set by 2010 Rotherham Ltd. All actions showing as red were expected to be reported as green (progressing in line with timescales) or completed by the end of March, 2010.

Tess Butler, Business Support Director, and Graham Eades, Interim Chief Executive, were also present to answer any questions.

Discussion ensued with the following issues highlighted:-

- Comments made at the 29th October, 2009, Panel meeting (Minute No. 47 refers) had been incorporated into the Plan
- 2010's Performance and Improvement Team monitored the Plan as well as officers within Neighbourhoods
- When a member of the public rang the golden number their query should be dealt with by the operative or transferred to the appropriate person, not given a further telephone number to ring
- Although the progress was to be welcomed, it was concerning that nearing the end of the contract there were still 10 actions that were of some concern and 7 behind schedule
- The latest figure for void properties stood at 268. This included 80 properties which had been with the Council awaiting decisions around investment (this now currently stood at 40)
- Monthly meetings took place between Neighbourhoods, EDS and 2010 regarding those properties requiring major investment. The properties were discussed and individual plans developed
- There was also a lot of work taking place regarding rent collection and historical rent arrears
- The average turn round time would increase, not due to a decrease in performance, but the inclusion of the longer term void properties
- 2010 were currently letting 45 properties each week
- The introduction of the Under Occupancy Policy would impact on re-let times and create additional voids
- There were a number of properties being held empty whilst awaiting Decent Homes works. That approach had now been

adjusted and properties were considered on their individual merits

- The Plan included a number of issues around Financial Regulations and Governance, Value for Money and training. A lot of the work was around the financial sustainability of the company not least the externalisation programme of the Repairs and Maintenance Service. The other issues related to the end of the Decency Programme and the implications thereof
- As part of the externalisation process, the Training Department had invited all operatives to present their qualifications; an Assessment Centre was to be convened for those that did not have them. Efficiency levels had to be improved so as to make the In House Service Provider competitive and able to bid for the new contract. 30 apprenticeships would be brought forward and taken into the labour market. There were too many apprentices in some areas and not sufficient in others so they would be multi-skilled to guarantee their employment going forward
- Apprentices currently received a 4 year contract to NVQ3 level; if they did 2 trades they were trained to 2 NVQs

Resolved:- (1) That the content of the Quarter 3 progress report (Appendix 1), and the remedial actions being taken by 2010 Rotherham Ltd to complete the 7 'off target' indicators be noted.

(2) That any updates be submitted to the Panel.

81. UNDER OCCUPATION POLICY

The Director of Housing and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report proposing the introduction of Under Occupancy and Housing Assistance incentives to encourage tenants that were under occupying large Council houses to downsize.

Currently there were 142 households in Rotherham that were under occupying 4 bedroom houses and 5,025 under occupying 3 bedroom houses. Of those, 2,538 households had applied via the Housing Register for a transfer to a smaller home. Since December, 2008, only 18 under occupied households living in family houses had actually transferred to a flat or bungalow. This was because overall the demand for accommodation was extremely high and most certainly outweighed supply. In total there were 7,981 single applicants on the Housing Register wanting to move to smaller accommodation.

Currently, there were no financial incentives offered, however, the Allocation Policy did award Priority status to households who wished to downsize to a flat or bungalow. Since December, 2008, 120 households had been awarded Priority status to enable them to transfer.

Implementation of an enhanced Under Occupancy Policy to encourage downsizing could include:-

- Better provision of information to tenants about the availability of suitable housing and the process of securing it could help encourage people in under occupancy situations to secure smaller properties
- Amend the Allocation Policy to allow under occupiers of 4 bedroom houses to downsize to 2 bedroom houses and permit more than 2 refusals
- Suggestions from customers and Elected Members including:-
 - o Work with internal and partner agencies
 - o Undertake chain lettings
 - o In cases of secure tenants, when a successor was a family member other than a spouse, award of Priority Plus status to offer suitable alternative smaller accommodation
 - o 2 tenancies for 1
 - o Local Lettings Policy giving preference to Council tenants who were under occupiers, with a proven record of "Good Tenant", move to RSL and Council New Building
 - o Promote positive features of sheltered housing

The implementation of a cash incentive scheme to encourage downsizing, a Mutual Exchange incentive or direct payment of expenses and removal costs were not supported at the present time but may be reconsidered dependent upon the success of the other options.

It had also been agreed by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Neighbourhood Services (Minute No. J.142 of 1st March, 2010), that the Director explore the possibility of nominating a dedicated officer to work on this issue.

Discussion ensued with the following issues highlighted:-

- There was a critical under supply of 2 bedroomed bungalows – 1 bedroomed bungalows were unpopular
- How many 3 bedroomed properties were there in the Borough?

- Could financial incentives be given those willing to move into a 1 bedroomed bungalow?
- Were the additional charges for the Warden Service and Rothercare a disincentive for people to move?
- Balance between sensitivity to people's demands and need and not forcing them unduly
- There would be Local Lettings Policies for the 72 new Council build. Work would take place with Registered Social Landlords around their development opportunities
- Work would take place over the next year to ascertain what could be done and what difference it would make. The work would then be reviewed and a further report submitted
- Possible negative effect at the other end of the Housing Register i.e. young people wanting starter homes
- Instead of a cash incentive there could be "support" e.g. arranging decorators, transport etc.

Resolved:- (1) That the report be noted.

(2) That the Policy review include a detailed action plan and consultation with tenants.

(3) That the action plan and details of consultation be submitted to the Panel.

82. HOMES AND COMMUNITIES AGENCY SINGLE CONVERSATION AND REVISED HOUSING STRATEGY

The Director of Housing and Neighbourhood Services submitted an update on the Homes and Communities Agency Single Conversation and Revised Housing Strategy.

The focus of the Single Conversation was around comprehensive place shaping, including the full range of housing, infrastructure, regeneration and community facilities. It was important that the process was not seen primarily as a housing issue but rather an issue of how improvements infrastructure and housing could contribute to and compliment aspirations to improve wider quality of life issues. Councils were required to develop a Local Investment Plan which would form the basis of a funding agreement between the

HCA and the local authorities.

The report set out the rationale and progress on re-writing the Rotherham Housing Strategy which would enhance its status as a key component to the Single Conversation. Although the Strategy had been adopted in 2008, it was at a time of peak housing markets when the main concerns had been to close the widening affordability gap and make the most of allocations available from the funds now brought together under the HCA umbrella. A Strategy needed to both reflect the new economic realities and to address the emerging challenge of climate change.

It had become clear that the HCA favoured a single lead officer and point of contact at each authority whom was able to articulate the Council's vision and to create a 'pen portrait' of the authority at the first workshop. To this end, the Sustainable Communities Manager in Neighbourhood Investment Services had been tasked with the role.

In collaboration with neighbouring authorities, a South Yorkshire Forward Strategy and Investment Plan 2010/ 14 was being developed by Transform South Yorkshire on behalf of the 4 authorities. This would serve as a sub-regional platform for supporting the local authorities in their respective Conversations. Rotherham's revised Housing Strategy was to be structured to align with the sub-regional statement emphasising Rotherham's unique attributes within the wider city region.

The report also set out the key milestones in the Single Conversation process including the revised Housing Strategy.

Resolved:- That the report be noted.

83. CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

The Panel noted the decisions made under delegated powers by the Cabinet Member for Housing and Neighbourhoods held on 4th and 18th January and 1st and 15th February, 2010.

Arising from Minute No. 128 (Repairs and Maintenance Service) it was noted that there had been a recent incident with 2010 Rotherham Ltd. failing to give tenants sufficient time to be consulted.

The Rotherham Tenants Compact stated that tenants and residents have 4 weeks notice with regard to consultation. RotherFed had received a number of complaints with regard to this being ignored.

Resolved:- That the Scrutiny Panel support the adherence to the

terms set out in the Tenants Compact particularly with regard to consultation.

84. SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY PANEL

The minutes of the meeting held on 28th January, 2010, were agreed.

85. PERFORMANCE AND SCRUTINY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

The minutes of the Performance and Scrutiny Overview Committee held on 15th and 29th January and 19th February, 2010, were noted.

86. CLIMATE CHANGE: SCRUTINY REVIEW

Further to Minute No. 67(2) of 28th January, 2010, Caroline Webb, Senior Scrutiny Adviser, asked if the Panel wished to undertake a Scrutiny Review into Climate Change.

It was proposed that a small steering group be established to determine the scope of the review, identify witnesses and undertake background research. The April Panel meeting would be used as a 'select committee' to gather evidence.

Resolved:- (1) That a half day review into the Local Authority's response to Climate Change be held.

(2) That Councillors Nightingale, S. Walker, F. Wright and Mr. D. Corkell meet to scope the Review and determine who the Panel wished to interview.

(3) That the Panel meeting scheduled for 22nd April, 2010, be used for evidence gathering.