

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
22nd February, 2012**

Present:- Councillor Falvey (in the Chair); Councillors Atkin, Beaumont, Dodson, Ellis, Gilding, Gosling, Havenhand, Middleton, Read, P. A. Russell, Sims, Swift, Jack and Foden. Along with co-opted members Mr C. Jepson, Mr C. Hartley and Mr B. Walker

Apologies for absence had been received from: Councillors Whysall, Andrews, Hodgkiss, Pickering, Beck and co-opted member Mr. J. Carr.

34. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

There were no Declarations of Interest to report.

35. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS.

There were no questions from members of the public or the press.

36. COMMUNICATIONS.

Bronwen Moss, Scrutiny Adviser, asked the Improving Places Select Commission to email her with suggested proposals for the agenda of the next meeting of this Commission.

Tourism would now be considered in the new Municipal Year as regional structures were changing and it would be useful to wait until these had been finalised before the Commission look at local and regional activity in this area of business.

37. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING OF THE IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION HELD ON 11TH JANUARY, 2012.

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission held on 11th January, 2012, were considered.

Resolved: - That the minutes of the previous meeting be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chairman.

38. THE INTEGRATION OF 2010 ROTHERHAM LTD WITH RMBC.

Councillor Jacquie Falvey, Vice-Chair of the Improving Places Select Commission, introduced David Richmond, Director, Housing and Neighbourhoods, Neighbourhood and Adult Services, along with other Neighbourhood and Adult Services Officers, to the meeting. The Officers had attended to give an overview in relation to the submitted report that provided information around the process and outcomes of the re-integration of the housing management service back to RMBC's direct control.

Additional handouts were distributed in relation to the information within the report and included details about performance and the future of council housing.

The decision to re-integrate the Arm's Length Management Organisation

(ALMO) that existed in relation to housing management services within the Council was taken by Rotherham's Cabinet on 3rd November, 2010 (Minute number C106 refers), following a consultation exercise with local tenants. 94% of 7,590 questionnaire respondents were in favour of returning housing management to the Council.

In addition to the support that emerged following consultation with stakeholders, the decision to re-integrate the service was taken against the backdrop of public sector finance reductions and the potential for the then Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Subsidy System to alter to a self-financing system whereby 100% of revenue would be retained by the Council for a share of a local allocation of the national housing debt. The Council had also received reports that stated that the ALMO's deficit would rise by £2m per annum from 2011/12 onwards.

The presentation was structured around four main areas in relation to the re-integration process and its rationale. These were:

- 1. Maximisation and protection of services to communities;**
- 2. Better financial control;**
- 3. Improvement in performance;**
- 4. Improvement in accountability.**

Salient issues from the presentation included:

- Restructuring had created a net loss of seven jobs. The outturn of this exercise had seen the creation of front-line jobs;
- Areas where duplication had occurred between the ALMO and the Council, such as the provision of HR, performance monitoring and finance, had now been streamlined;
- The new structure focused available resources on customer facing activities leading to improved services that included repairs and maintenance, re-letting empty properties, efficient and appropriate re-letting of previously adapted homes, and dealing with reports of anti-social behaviour;
- A comparison of service performance was considered as at 1st January, 2011, under ALMO management, and 1st January, 2012, under the direct control of RMBC;
 - Performance measures considered included repairs and maintenance, anti-social behaviour and improving conditions in neighbourhoods, customer feedback, empty properties, gas safety certificates and achievements against the Housing Excellence Plan.
- Revised staffing structures for the services within the housing management services were considered;
- The role of Housing Champions had been reviewed and now had a focus on tackling anti-social behaviour and improving conditions in neighbourhoods;
 - The number of outstanding anti-social behaviour cases on 1st January, 2012 was 834, compared to 1,108 at the point of re-integration;
- Future anticipated service developments following consultations and proposed policy changes included:

- Possible application of criteria to the 'open' housing register, such as medical need, behaviour, work status, welfare and caring duties, adoptive and foster families and homelessness;
- Potential to opt to terminate homelessness obligations in the private rented sector;
- Proposals in relation to the 'bedroom tax', whereby tenants' housing benefits would be reduced if they had more than one spare bedroom;
- Possible issuing of flexible tenancies for a temporary period.

Discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:

- Joint working of the Housing Champion and the Anti-Social Behaviour role.
- Co-location of services.
- Consultation around Right to Buy scheme – potential effect on financial and service planning.
- Interfaces between the LA and Private Landlords.
- Pepper-potting arrangements whereby housing tenants who had refused Decent Homes repairs and upgrades and the measures that were taken to ensure that all homes were reached under the scheme.

Resolved: - (1) That the report be received and it's contents noted.

(2) That the Neighbourhood and Adult Services Officers be thanked for attending the meeting and contributing the discussion.

(3) That the Improving Places Select Commission receives an update on the progress made by the Housing Management Service. The report should be presented to the September meeting of this Commission.

39. AREA HOUSING PANELS.

Teresa Butler, Business Support Director, Housing and Neighbourhood Services, was welcomed to the meeting to present a report on the review of Area Housing Panels across the Borough. Following the re-integration of the Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) to the Council, and in the context of local democracy developments and changes in national housing policy, it was considered timely to review the role of the Area Housing Panels. These organisations existed to engage and inform council tenants about services and make decisions about the deployment of the Housing Revenue Account funds.

The aim of the review into Area Housing Panels was to: -

1. Re-define and strengthen their role in service improvement;
2. Give tenants greater confidence that the Council was delivering what was important to them;
3. Ensure tenants had the opportunity to influence the local housing 'offer'.

The report detailed the consultation process, activities undertaken and those

who had been consulted. The consultation period had ran from 12th September, 2011, to 15th December, 2011 and was conducted according to the 'Code of Practice on Consultation' issued by the Better Regulation Executive in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

The overarching aims of the review were: -

1. Provide a strong governance framework for Area Housing Panels with links to other local democratic activities;
2. Demonstrate robust accountability for Housing Revenue Account expenditure;
3. Involve Area Housing Panels in a wider range of activities that supported the co-regulation required of social housing providers.

A successful event had been arranged by RotherFed, the federation of tenants and residents' associations, on 22nd November, 2011, which was attended by one-hundred people. The outcome of the event was that a number of proposals were suggested and had been outlined in the submitted report at sections A – N. The proposed actions were all relatively simple and accommodated in existing budgets.

- As Area Housing Panels were co-terminus with Area Assemblies, it was suggested that better linkages were made between the two groups.
- Stakeholders should be alerted when meetings were due to take place.
- A potential role for Area Housing Panels to act as a 'local filter' for complaints before they progressed to the National Housing Ombudsman.

Discussion ensued regarding the proposals made, and the following salient issues were made by members of the Improving Places Select Commission:

- A clear working relationship between Area Housing Panels and Area Assemblies could avoid duplication between the two group's roles.
- Area Assembly Co-ordinating Groups have a Constitution which specified membership. Area Assemblies held public meetings which that were open to all.
- Need to ensure that existing structures were inclusive.

Resolved: - (1) That the report be received and its content noted.

(2) That the Cabinet Member for Safe and Attractive Neighbourhoods considers postponing the completion of the AHP Review until after the review of Rotherfed and TARA's was completed.

(3) That the issue be returned to the Improving Places Select Commission following implementation of the proposals.

40. DATE, TIME AND VENUE FOR THE NEXT MEETING:-

Resolved: - That the next meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission take place on Wednesday 28th March, 2012, to start at 1.30 pm in the Rotherham Town Hall, Moorgate Street, Rotherham, S60 2TH.