

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
16th September, 2014

Present:- Councillor Read (in the Chair); Councillors Cowles, Gilding, N. Hamilton, Sims and Wallis.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Andrews, Atkin, Copnell, Gosling and Roche.

19. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no Declarations of Interest made at the meeting.

20. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

There were no members of the public or press present at the meeting.

21. COMMUNICATIONS

There were no communications to report.

22. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 23RD JULY, 2014

Resolved:- That the minutes of the previous meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission, held on 23rd July, 2014, be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chairman subject to the following amendment:-

Minute No. 13 (Private Rented Housing – Selective Licensing

“Resolved:- (2) That the Select Commission agreed that there was a need for action with regard to private sector rented properties in the areas identified by officers.

(3) That where there was legal advice that the Local Authority had to pursue a voluntary scheme that be the first course of action, however, should that fail the Select Commission would wish to see the Council move to a mandatory scheme as quickly as possible.”

23. SCRUTINY REVIEW - SUPPORTING THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Consideration was given to a report of the above Scrutiny Review, Chaired by Councillor Wallis which set out the findings and recommendations of the above Scrutiny Review.

The 4 main aims of the Review had been:-

- To analyse the impact of changes to local government finance – particularly business rates

- To analyse how the Council could create the right conditions for growth in the private sector
- To influence the development of the growth plan for Rotherham which in turn fed into the City Region growth plan
- To develop a whole Council approach to increase business rates in Rotherham

The recommendations that emerged from the review findings had been broken down into those that could be implemented quickly and those that were more strategic in nature. The latter focussed very much on structural responses within the Council and also working in a more multi-disciplinary manner including interaction with partners.

Deborah Fellowes, Policy Manager, gave the following powerpoint presentation:-

Background: The Challenges

- Changes to local government finance especially business rates
- Changes to the structure of the local economy
- Future reductions in ERDF
- Dependence on a small number of big players (including the Council itself)

Evidence

- Focus on a whole Council approach by looking at
 - Asset Management
 - Planning
 - Transportation
 - Housing
 - Economic Development/RIDO
 - Also Chamber and Private Sector

RMBC: The Key Actor

- “The one constant”
- Land supply
- Networks and partnerships
- Potential investor
- Catalyst for generating the right investment
- Role in skills development

Towards a new Strategy?

- Council needs to generate income via business rates and Council Tax
- Creation of jobs for local people – targeting deprived communities
- Land supply is crucial
- Where is the next Dearne Valley?
- Council was key in driving forward the economy

Council's Role

- More flexible approach – less bureaucracy
- Need to invest resources and take risks
- Area based regeneration approaches with mixed land use proposals
- Combined growth approach for all departments
- Multi-functional force approach
- “wear a big” hat – tell people

The broader context

- Need to influence City Region to reflect Rotherham's priorities
- Need to create business friendly offer
- Signs of upturn and timing is right for Council to intervene
- Do nothing no longer an option
- Further reduction in ERDF in 2015

Impact on local people

- Transport, education and housing were key
- Rotherham had poor results with 16-19 year olds – this needed to be tackled monitoring apprenticeships?
- Adult skills and lifelong learning was lacking direction and leadership
- Mandate for outlying town centres to be regenerated

Partnership

- Reduction in resources for all partners
- Need clear objectives and targets in growth plans – Rotherham and Sheffield City Region
- Greater clarity about role within Sheffield City Region
- More collaboration less duplication
- Joint promotion of Rotherham
- Dialogue with businesses

The review had made 12 recommendations:-

Early Implementation:

1. The Economic Development Team within the Council should ensure that the emerging Growth Plan was focused around two key objectives – income generation and employment creation.
2. Targets and outcomes should be developed for the plan that were smart – suggestions include number of businesses accessing services, the number of young people accessing apprenticeships, the number of new entrants to post compulsory education and the number of over 16s gaining accredited qualifications.
3. The Economic Development Team should ensure that the growth plan was jointly owned by local partners
4. They should also ensure that it was communicated effectively to partners and stakeholders, as part of an ongoing campaign to “talk up”

Rotherham and its achievements. These stakeholders should include the Sheffield City Region structures and the private sector.

5. The Council should identify, in the first instance, its top ten development sites and focus on these in its policies and plans. Within this the identification and delivery of a strategically important site should be the number 1 priority for Rotherham to remain competitive.
6. The Council should consider prioritising all town centres and giving a policy mandate for this to happen.
7. The Council should consider how Elected Members could input to the development of Council Policy, particularly with regard to economic growth, by utilising the wide range of talent and expertise that exists within this pool. Elected Members can further assist with the promotion of Rotherham.

Longer Term Strategy

8. The Council should aim to establish a multi-disciplinary “Task Force” with the key purpose of providing a co-ordinated holistic approach to generating investment and economic growth in Rotherham, for the benefit of its local businesses, communities and residents. The focus should be on working both internally, and in partnership with the private sector in Rotherham, to include a range of projects in terms of size and value. The external business support process should be led by RIDO as a recognised brand within Rotherham.
9. The Task Force should include Planning, Asset Management, Housing, Transport, Education and potentially Health partners. These functions would be included on the basis of a unique drivers approach for each project. In line with recommendation 7 above, specific councillors (with specific expertise) and Ward Members should be included in this approach. This model could be adapted for individual projects, with bespoke task groups set up for larger projects including provision for specific expertise to be co-opted. (diagram to be developed)
10. This Task Force should be responsible for ensuring that the strategy should identify land supply i.e. the next Dearne Valley and link into work on the Local Plan, and also the following issues:
 - Use of capital and borrowing to develop sites and premises
 - The approach to the development of this land – some sites for area based regeneration initiatives
11. The Council should consider how to develop a business friendly culture amongst all its staff – skills development and training issues and also the possibility of setting growth targets for employees where appropriate. A key element of this would be to raise awareness within

the Council of the changes to business rates and the importance of them in terms of generating income for the Council.

12. The Scrutiny function in the Council should consider looking further at the following issues;
- The development of aspirational housing and associated services/communities in Rotherham
 - Work with schools and training providers/colleges around the 16+ skills agenda to establish stronger links with employers and to engender an enterprising and aspirational culture.

Resolved:- (1) That the findings and recommendations of the report be endorsed.

(2) That the report be forwarded to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board and Cabinet.

24. COUNCIL HOUSING - RENT COLLECTION AND ARREARS RECOVERY POLICY

Paul Elliott, Business and Commercial Programme Manager, presented the proposed Rent Collection and Arrears Recovery Policy and associated processes which had been refreshed given the challenges faced to maximise income recovery to the Housing Revenue Account in light of the ongoing Welfare Reform agenda.

The Government's ongoing Welfare Reform, including the introduction of Under Occupancy Criteria, was having a direct impact on the number of active arrears cases being managed by the Housing Income Team. The number of tenants affected had remained relatively stable since April, 2013, at approximately 3,300 tenants of which 2,500 were in arrears. During the first 12 months of the Welfare changes, there had been limited intervention by the Income Team due to the low level of arrears that existed. However, if unaddressed over time this would become a significant issue for both tenants and the Council's finances.

The report set out details of the recovery process which started on the 3rd week of non-clearance when a reminder letter was sent to the tenant. The letter was only triggered when a balance exceeded £30 to ensure the process was cost effective and equitable. A second reminder was sent on the 4th week when arrears exceeded £45. If the debt remained outstanding and no contact had been made, a visit to the tenant would be made to establish their personal circumstances and arrange to clear the balance by instalments. If balances remained outstanding after 5 weeks and/or the agreement was breached, consideration would be given to the serving of a Notice of Intention to Seek Possession which was the first step prior to litigation. Before considering litigation, it was the view that commencing action below £300 was disproportionate to the debt. In the case of younger tenants, there would be a referral to Rush House and other appropriate agencies.

The proposed changes to the Rent Collection and Arrears Recovery Policy were set out in full in the report submitted.

Discussion ensued with the following issues raised/clarified:-

- Brighton and Edinburgh Councils had stated that they would not evict a tenant if the individual's circumstances were solely due to the Under-Occupancy penalty. Rotherham's approach was to be fair and equitable to all its tenants and not single out 1 particular group. The impetus was to stop the debt and provide the support to prevent arrears. Arrears needed to be targeted at £250 or below as it was felt at that point tenants could still recover from debt in the short term
- The average cost of eviction was £8-9,000. It included the costs of re-letting property, bringing the property up to a re-lettable standard and, generally, the actual debt itself
- Local intelligence showed that there was an increase in the "working poor". There was a large number of tenants in arrears who were working and not in receipt of benefits but were still struggling to pay their rent
- The Authority waited until the debt was proportionate as entering a case into Court Proceedings added a further £3-4,000 to a debt
- To date no eviction proceedings against anyone due to Under Occupancy arrears have been taken but if the arrears continued to raise it was inevitable that that position would change
- At the current time there was no other assistance other than downsizing
- The Authority had the temporary measure of Discretionary Housing funding but there was no indication if there would be further funding after 31st March, 2015
- In Rotherham there were 3,349 tenants subject to the Under Occupancy charge of which 2,145 were in some form of arrears at a cost of £425,000. These were tenants who had never fallen into arrears before
- Tenants were offered inclusion on the downsizing register, however, there was not the amount of stock required in some areas
- Although it was included in the Tenancy Agreement historically it had never been the practice of the Authority to request the payment of 1 week's rent in advance. This had now been activated and once the

tenant had moved into the property the week's advance rent was credited to the rent account

- A tenant who was subject to potential eviction and had dependent children would be referred to a CYPS Support Worker for additional support. There were also a Tenancy Support Officer, Money Advice Officers and Employment Solutions Officers for all tenants facing potential eviction who could provide support with regard to applying for Housing Benefit etc.
- The key to a sustainable tenancy was the sign up interview. At that interview the Allocations Officer would conduct an income and expenditure assessment with the prospective tenant to establish if they had sufficient income to afford the weekly rent. There were also credit checks so it was understood the level of potential debt the tenant may have
- Currently there were still tenants being allocated properties that would be subject to the Under Occupancy charge based on whether they could afford the tenancy in view of the sign up interview (see above). The right to refuse prospective tenants who were unable to demonstrate they could afford to pay the rent would come into force as from 28th October, 2014
- The final decision on the ending of a tenancy was made by a Judge. In the more complicated cases that may involve someone with mental health issues or children, a case conference would be convened to make the final decision as to whether the tenancy was terminated or not. The standard process would be to seek possession through the serving of a Notice to Seek Possession and would probably take 12-18 months dependent upon the number of times i was entered into Court, any payments made etc.

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

(2) That officers continue to work pro-actively with prospective tenants.

25. GROUNDS MAINTENANCE - SCRUTINY REVIEW - UPDATE

This item was deferred until the next meeting of the Select Commission.

26. PROPOSED RESPONSE TO THE GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION ON PARKING

Martin Beard, Parking Services Manager, submitted the proposed response to the Government's consultation on various issues regarding parking.

The Government had stated that it wanted to make it easier for local residents and firms to challenge unfair, disproportionate or unreasonable parking policies. This could include the provision of parking, parking charges and the use of yellow lines.

The Government was proposing to introduce a requirement that in response to a petition from local residents and/or businesses, local authorities must review their specific parking policy in a specified location and produce a report for consideration and decision by Councillors in an appropriate public Council meeting. This approach combined direct democracy (the right to petition and call a review) with representative democracy. The Policy would initially be introduced through statutory guidance and consideration given to legislation.

The proposed response was attached as an appendix to the report submitted.

It was noted that the Authority already had policies in place for dealing with any challenges.

Resolved:- That the proposed consultation response be noted.