

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Cabinet – 23 December 2019

Report Title

Area Housing Panels Review

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

Yes

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Anne Marie Lubanski, Strategic Director of Adult Care, Housing and Public Health

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

On the 18th March 2019, the Cabinet received a report regarding Area Housing Panels proposing a review of the existing Panels' organisational arrangements and associated budget setting. This was set in the context of the new Thriving Neighbourhoods Strategy and a move towards Ward based working arrangements. The Cabinet approved (Minute No:127 refers) a ward level budget setting arrangement for 2019/20 and resolved that a further report setting out recommendations for the new organisational and budget setting arrangements for tenant engagement from 2020/21, be presented to the Cabinet, following a further review and consultation process.

This report provides details of the review process and consultation findings and sets out recommendations for revised budget setting, associated governance and organisational arrangements for tenant engagement, to be implemented from 2020.

Recommendations

1. That the existing Area Housing Panels be disestablished at the end of the 2019/20 financial year and be replaced by 25 ward Housing Hubs.

2. That from 2020/21 financial year, a base budget of £4,000 be set per ward, with the remainder of the annual budget provision then being allocated to wards, based upon the percentage of Council homes within each ward.
3. That the Assistant Director of Housing be authorised, in consultation with the Head of Finance (Adults, Public Health and Housing), to increase the ward Housing Hubs budget (on a ward by ward basis) by the value of the ward Housing Hub underspend in the preceding year within the 4 year cycle.
4. That the proposed governance arrangements, set out in 3.2.3 below, be approved.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 Tenant Involvement Structure
Appendix 2 Proposed Ward Budgets for 2020/21
Appendix 3 Equality Analysis

Background Papers

Report: Area Housing Panels Review - Cabinet, 18th March 2019, Minute No: 127

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

Improving Places Select Commission – 24 October 2019

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Area Housing Panels Review

1. Background

- 1.1 In March 2019, the Council's Cabinet received a report setting out the rationale for a review of the current geographical and budget setting arrangements for Area Housing Panels (AHP's). The report identified that the existing Area Housing Panel arrangements were based upon the former Area Assembly geography, which was now obsolete and suggested the need for a review of both the geographical and budget setting arrangements for Area Housing Panels.
- 1.2 The report recommended the establishment of ward level budget setting arrangements for the AHP's from 2019/20 and that a review of geographical and budget setting arrangements, having regard to the new Ward boundaries from 2020, should be undertaken, with a further report to be presented to the Cabinet.
- 1.3 Having considered the report, the Cabinet approved (Minute No:127, 18th March 2019 refers) a ward level budget setting arrangement for 2019/20 and resolved that a further report setting out recommendations for the new organisational and budget arrangements for Area Housing Panels from 2020/21, be presented to the Cabinet.
- 1.4 A review has subsequently been undertaken, including a consultation process with existing Area Housing Panels, ward members and key stakeholders.
- 1.5 This report provides details of the findings of the consultation process; three 'pilots' that are being undertaken to test new proposed ways of working and proposals for a Ward based structural approach to tenant engagement and revised budget setting and associated governance arrangements from 2020/21.

2. Key Issues

2.1 Tenant Engagement – our duties and responsibilities

The Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard published in 2007 by the (then) Homes and Communities Agency (now Homes England) placed a statutory duty on housing providers to ensure that tenants are given a wide range of opportunities to influence and be involved in the development of policies, decision making, performance monitoring, management and scrutiny of housing services.

The Social Housing Green Paper 'A New Deal for Social Housing' published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in 2018 also places a requirement upon housing providers, to enable tenants to have a stronger voice to influence decisions and challenge their landlords, in relation to performance and service delivery.

The current Area Housing Panels are a significant component of the Council's tenant engagement framework, in empowering and involving tenants in the ongoing development and delivery of housing services and in ensuring the Council's compliance with the regulatory standards. In turn, Area Housing Panels nominate representatives from the Panels to attend other tenant engagement and empowerment forums, such as the over-arching Housing Involvement Panel, Quality and Standards Challenge Group and service area specific focus groups.

2.2 Tenant Engagement – the need for change.

Area Housing Panels have existed as an integral part of Housing Services' tenant and resident engagement framework for over 20 years. There are currently seven Area Housing Panels, which remain geographically aligned to the boundaries of (and also still bear the names of) the former Area Assemblies.

- 2.2.1 Tenant representatives on the panels also support the wider customer engagement and service development framework within Housing Services. This includes the over-arching Housing Involvement Panel, Quality and Standards Challenge Group and service area specific focus groups. Area Housing Panels nominate representatives from the panels to attend these additional forums.
- 2.2.2 The launch of the Thriving Neighbourhoods Strategy and the move towards a new neighbourhood working model, with electoral wards as the principal building blocks, has resulted in the existing Area Housing Panel geography becoming obsolete and out of step with the new arrangements. The implementation of new electoral ward arrangements in 2020 is also a further driver for change. This necessitates that any new geographical arrangements for tenant engagement are developed and implemented in line with ward boundary changes in 2020.
- 2.2.3 There are currently 48 tenants in addition to residents, community representatives and ward members actively involved in Area Housing Panels across the borough. A number of tenants who were involved when the panels were initially set up are still active in the panels.
- 2.2.4 Although there is a long standing core group of active tenants engaged in the involvement structures, attendance at panel meetings and other forums is declining. This situation is not unique to Rotherham. The consultation process undertaken and set out below, has indicated that there is a need to stimulate more active involvement and capacity. To do that successfully, there needs to be a broader engagement offer, to expand existing opportunities and methods of engagement, to stimulate and sustain meaningful involvement by all tenants.

2.3 Tenant Engagement - sustaining best practice and continuous improvement.

The Council currently holds accreditation from the national Tpas organisation (Tenant Engagement Experts) and was a regional Tpas award winner in 2018 and award nominee for national Tpas awards in 2019. This accreditation has recently been re-affirmed for a further three year period, in recognition of the continuing excellent work being done in Rotherham in support of local tenant engagement and empowerment. Feedback from the accreditation process indicated that areas of service delivery were considered best practice. The Council is keen to ensure that this position is sustained and strengthened going forward.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 Organisational Arrangements

- 3.1.1 Consultation and discussions have been held in recent months with the Housing Involvement Panel, Area Housing Panel representatives, ward members and key partners such as Rotherfed, with regard to the potential future shape and form of tenant engagement arrangements and budget setting. Discussions have focussed upon the need for a diverse ward level tenant engagement framework, as the foundation for a broader service specific offer. This includes how the Council and key partners can continue to enhance our tenant engagement framework, whilst at the same time fully aligning with the broader neighbourhood working approach. Two options were considered.

Option A - Retain existing Area Housing Panel arrangements.

- 3.1.2 This option would retain the current seven area housing panels, in their present geographical form.
- 3.1.3 Whilst this approach would deliver immediate continuity, it would not align with the new neighbourhood working approach being adopted or with the new ward arrangements to be implemented in 2020. In addition, as indicated above, existing panel membership is decreasing, resulting in some panel meetings not being quorate, delaying decision making. This option also provides limited opportunities for the majority of Council tenants to become involved, where they are unable to attend formal meetings.

For these reasons, this option is not recommended.

Option B - Develop flexible Ward level 'Housing Hubs'.

- 3.1.4 This option would create 25 ward Housing Hubs, aligned to the new ward boundaries from 2020, with a 'menu' of options for involvement, specific and flexible to each ward. This would include online engagement through a Ward on-line platform, local meetings, attendance at local TARA and other tenants meetings by request, ward walkabouts, news and alerts by instant messaging etc. This approach would align geographically with the new Ward boundaries, reflect neighbourhood working arrangements and provide a

variety of means by which more local tenants and residents can 'get involved'.

3.1.5

For these reasons, this option is recommended.

Having considered each option and reflecting upon the findings from the consultation, Option B is recommended, to commence in 2020. This would see the dis-establishment of the existing seven Area Housing Panels and the creation of 25 ward Housing Hubs, aligned to each of the new wards, from 2020.

- 3.1.6 To facilitate this, it will be essential to address key issues identified through the review and consultation process; particularly the need to increase tenant engagement capacity and ensure that there is a flexible 'offer' to reach out to and engage as many tenants as possible.
- 3.1.7

In recognition of this, tenant engagement opportunities are being actively promoted by the Council and Rotherham Federation of Communities. This is to address the current position, whereby some wards have no active or structured tenant engagement representation currently. The consultation process identified that one of the main barriers for engagement is the current predominantly meeting focussed approach. The approach going forward will therefore offer a more diverse range of opportunities for involvement.

3.1.8

The ward Housing Hubs will continue to receive regular updates about the housing service, including service performance and service development proposals and will also provide an opportunity for tenants to raise issues with Council officers and ward members about matters relating to the housing service, their homes and neighbourhoods. The ward Housing Hubs on-line platforms will be linked into the Council's tenant engagement webpage and the Neighbourhoods Team web pages to ensure alignment with ward based working.

3.1.9

In common with existing practice for the current Area Housing Panels, each ward will be asked to submit expressions of interest from tenants to represent their ward at the Housing Involvement Panel, as well as other forums within the Council's tenant engagement governance structure, such as the Quality and Standards Challenge Group and Rotherham Federation of Communities. The existing mechanism for this will be revised to reflect the new ward level arrangements.

3.1.10

3.1.11

Appendix 1 articulates how the ward Housing Hub and wider tenant engagement structure would look.

To test new approaches to engagement at ward level and aid any future implementation, three 'pilots' have recently commenced in Wales, Boston Castle and Wingfield wards.

3.1.12 The rationale for choosing Wales, Wingfield and Boston Castle was as follows:

- Wales ward - a rural area in the south of the borough, which has had very little tenant representation on the Area Housing Panels, but has active tenants through locally based tenants and residents groups, which provide opportunities to strengthen local engagement. This is an opportunity to test approaches to tenant engagement in more rural areas.
- Wingfield ward – a ward which has a significantly high number of council properties and a high number of younger council tenants. Again, there is very little tenant representation on the current Area Housing Panel from this ward. Wingfield Ward has been undertaking early activity in support of ward based working, providing a strong foundation to build upon. This is an ideal opportunity to engage with younger tenants, in high density urban areas.
- Boston Castle Ward – the ward has a diverse community and is close to the town centre, which has a broad range of housing types and tenures, with new housing developments taking place and further developments in the pipeline. The ward has active groups locally and this is an opportunity to engage with underrepresented groups, such as BMA and young families, in an urban/town centre setting.

3.1.13 The three pilots are continuing to develop, but there is an active appetite to sustain and increase current engagement capacity, modernise and innovate and align with and benefit from wider neighbourhood working opportunities.

3.1.14 Rotherham Federation of Communities is supporting the Council in identifying and building tenants and resident capacity within each of the wards. This is in recognition that to create and sustain tenant engagement at ward level, the Council will need to stimulate significantly more actively involved tenants and residents within each of the new wards. Work is also developing to establish digital engagement solutions, such as a ward Housing Hub online platform, which would enable further active involvement, where residents are unable to attend meetings.

3.2 **Budget Setting and associated governance arrangements**

3.2.1 **Budget setting**

In March 2019, the Cabinet approved a new ward based budget setting arrangement for the Area Housing Panels. This has since been implemented.

The overall annual budget of £203,700 is initially allocated with each of the current 21 ward's receiving a base budget of £8,000. The remaining budget sum is then allocated to each ward based upon the percentage of Council homes in the ward.

This budget setting arrangement has provided each ward with a guaranteed base budget, with wards with higher numbers of Council homes receiving comparatively more. Many of these areas are also areas of highest deprivation.

However, from 2020, as the borough will consist of 25 wards, with each receiving a base budget of £8000 under current arrangements, the remaining budget available from the annual £203,700 would be significantly reduced. In turn, this would reduce the differential in funding created when the remaining budget is allocated based upon the number of Council homes in the ward.

Consideration has been given to future budget setting, retaining the existing principles of a guaranteed base budget offer; with a further budget allocation based upon Council homes numbers. This is to ensure that ward budget setting from 2020/21 can still demonstrate a minimum base budget offer, but also a tangible differential in funding for those areas with larger numbers of Council homes.

Having considered various scenarios, it is proposed that from 2020/21, the annual overall budget will remain as currently set, with the base budget being set at a revised level of £4000 per ward. The remainder of the annual budget will then be allocated based upon the percentage of Council homes in the ward. This proposal will continue to provide a minimum base budget offer to all wards. It will ensure that those wards with higher numbers of Council homes continue to receive comparatively more, deliver a meaningful differential in budget allocations, particularly between the most and least deprived areas of the borough.

Based upon this budget setting approach, Appendix 2 sets out the proposed ward budgets from 2020/21.

3.2.2 Budget 'Roll-forward'

Increasingly, services are adopting neighbourhood working principles and practices, which include making best use of ward level resources to deliver ward plan priorities. The changes to the Area Housing Panel project governance arrangements in 2019/20 reflected this, by considering how Panel funding could potentially be used alongside other Ward based budgets.

The existing Area Housing Panel budget is funded by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and is set and administered on an annual basis. Any funding not spent during the financial year, is returned to the Housing Revenue Account reserve. Unspent funding is not available in the following financial year.

However, other ward based budgets have a facility to roll forward funding, within a four year cycle.

In order to make best use of resources and improve coordination, it is proposed that the rebranded annual ward Housing Hubs budget also has a roll forward facility. As the HRA budget would still be set and agreed annually, it is proposed that the budgets are increased at the start of the financial year by the value of the underspend (in the preceding financial year) on a ward by ward basis within a four yearly cycle.

3.2.3 Budget and Project Governance

The current governance arrangements for the approval of the existing Area Housing Panel allocated funding for local projects requires approval by ward members as well as tenants at the Area Housing Panel Meetings. The existing panel meetings take place every two months and meetings need to be quorate, in line with the terms of reference, in order to take decisions and approve projects. This current process can cause delays in decision making and subsequent delivery of approved projects.

Moving towards a proposed ward Housing Hub framework, the decision making process for the funding of projects will need to be revised.

In brief, tenants and residents, ward members and potentially other stakeholders within the ward will be encouraged to submit project proposals for funding from the ward Housing Hub budget. Project proposals will be received and assessed by Housing Services' Tenant Involvement Team and Neighbourhoods Team, to check whether the proposal is in line with ward plan priorities and actions, Housing priorities etc. and meets the requirements for the use of Housing Revenue Account (HRA) funding. The latter is necessary, as there are clear regulatory guidelines regarding the use of HRA resources. Project proposals will then be referred to ward members through the ward briefing process, to gain their views and also consider the scope for potential match funding with other ward based budgets or alternative funding streams, where applicable. Subject to support by ward members, project proposals will then be finalised and notified to tenants and residents, through the ward Housing Hub communication framework, for final comment, prior to projects being initiated.

As part of a modernised digital offer, tenants will be given the opportunity to put forward suggestions for potential projects to be funded from the ward Housing Hub budget, online through the website, as well as through other existing routes.

The Council and Rotherham Federation of Communities are currently developing an improved approach to sharing the impact and outcomes of local project activity and good news stories.

4. Consultation on proposal

- 4.1 A programme of consultation has been undertaken as part of the review, involving existing Area Housing Panel members, tenants, the Housing Involvement Panel, ward members and other key stakeholders, such as Rotherham Federation of Communities and the Parish Council Liaison network. Details of the Area Housing Panel review and how to offer views was placed online on the Council's tenant involvement webpage and promoted by Rotherham Federation of Communities, including at the Council's annual Tenants Open Day.

Rotherham Federation of Communities has also supported engagement with local tenants and residents groups. Discussions have been held with the Council's Head of Neighbourhoods and discussions facilitated at the Neighbourhood Working Members Forum.

The consultation commenced in November 2018 and concluded in July 2019. 78 consultation responses were received during this time.

- 4.2 In summary, the consultation to date has produced the following feedback:

- A recognition of the need for tenant engagement arrangements to align with neighbourhood working and a ward based approach.
- That any new proposals should sustain tenant engagement and empowerment locally and add further value to the strong framework already in place.
- That there should be a flexible approach to any new arrangements, reflective of local issues and circumstances.
- That a digital engagement offer needs to be developed, to engage those who wish to 'get involved', but not necessarily through a traditional meeting format. Also, that tenant engagement activity, such as project submissions and approvals, could be undertaken digitally.
- An acknowledgement that the review process and the re-organisation of existing Area Housing Panels presented a great opportunity to boost tenant involvement capacity.
- Recognition of the need for ward member involvement and the potential for added value, such as joint funding of local project proposals from both housing and other ward based budgets and ward member support to tenants groups and forums, through their community leadership role.
- A desire by Parish Councils to become more actively involved..
- A recognition that more needs to be done to celebrate the activity and projects successfully delivered within the neighbourhoods.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

- 5.1 Subject to approval, the new ward Housing Hub budgets will commence from April 2020, with the new ward housing organisational arrangements commencing from 2020.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

- 6.1 There is currently no mechanism to amend the Housing Revenue Account budget outside of the HRA budget setting and accounting framework. The recommendations in the report would allow for unspent funding to be allocated from the HRA reserve on an annual basis. The spend is budgeted for over the 4 yearly cycle as part of the HRA business plan: transferring spend between years would not adversely impact the sustainability of the HRA.
- 6.2 There are no procurement implication associated with the recommendations contained in the report

7. Legal Advice and Implications

- 7.1 There are no legal implications associated with the recommendations contained in the report.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

- 8.1 There are no specific HR implications arising from the proposals and recommendations contained in the report.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

- 9.1 The proposed new arrangements are designed to maximise inclusiveness and broader engagement with all tenants and the wider community. The Council will address any barriers to involvement working, with the local Tenant Federation and colleagues in the Neighbourhoods Team.
- 9.2 The neighbourhood based projects currently delivered through the Area Housing Panel budget, address local issues of concern and deliver a positive impact within the community. Projects undertaken to date have included community safety and public realm related investments, including improvements to local play provision on housing administered sites. Such projects directly and indirectly support vulnerable adults and children.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

- 10.1 The funding is available for all Council tenants in Rotherham to access at ward level. Key issues identified through the review and consultation process has identified the need to increase tenant engagement capacity and ensure that there is a flexible 'offer' to reach out to and engage as many tenants as possible.

- 10.2 In recognition of this, tenant engagement opportunities are being actively promoted by the Council and Rotherham Federation of Communities. This is to address the current position, whereby some wards have no active or structured tenant engagement representation currently. The consultation process identified that one of the main barriers for engagement is the current predominantly meeting focussed approach. The approach going forward will therefore offer a more diverse range of opportunities for involvement. This is evidenced in the Equality Analysis at Appendix 3.

11. Implications for Partners

- 11.1 Discussions have been held with Rotherham Federation of Communities with regard to the proposals contained within this report. Rotherham Federation of Communities has supported the Council with the consultation.

This will impact on the new Tenant Federation Contract due to commence on 1st April 2020. The appointed Tenant Federation will have a key role in supporting the Council to get tenants involved in the proposed ward Housing Hubs.

Ward members and other key services such as the Neighbourhoods team and key partners, have been engaged in the consultation process and the development of the proposals and recommendations presented in this report

12. Risks and Mitigation

- 12.1. Area Housing Panel funding is allocated from the Housing Revenue Account. There are statutory guidelines relating to the use of Housing Revenue Account funding. These requirements are reflected within the project approval process and associated budget monitoring arrangements.
- 12.2 A ward based approach will generate an increase in local engagement and project activity and delivery. The resources required to facilitate the new arrangements have been fully considered and reflected within service resource planning and contract procurement processes.
- 12.3 Tenants may feel disempowered by the proposed changes to the governance arrangements. Initial discussions have been held with existing Area Housing Panel tenant representatives regarding the rationale for the proposed changes. It has been stressed that project proposals will be very much community driven and promoted, with the changes to governance arrangements bringing additional oversight and links to local ward priorities and plans; opportunities for added value, in terms of project funding and delivery; improved outcomes and maximising local impact.

13. Accountable Officers

Paul Walsh, Head of Housing Operational Services

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers:-

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp	12/12/19
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	27/11/19
Head of Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Bal Nahal	27/11/19

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