

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday, 9th June, 2020**

Present:- Councillor Mallinder (in the Chair); Councillors Atkin, Buckley, Elliot, Jacques, Jepson, Jones, Khan, McNeely, Reeder, Rushforth, Sansome, Sheppard, Taylor, Tweed, Whysall and Wyatt.

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs. W. Birch and Cllr. B. Cutts.

The webcast of the Council Meeting can be viewed at:-
<https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

66. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 5 MARCH 2020

The minutes of the meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission on 5 March 2020, were approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

67. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

As a matter of clarification, Councillor David Sheppard declared a personal interest as someone who lives in one of the newly established selective licensing areas.

68. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

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

69. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

There were no items of business for which it was necessary to exclude members of the press or public.

70. COMMUNICATIONS

No communications were presented.

71. HOUSING STRATEGY 2019 - 2022 PROGRESS UPDATE

Consideration was given to a report detailing progress against the housing targets and measures for housing strategy and growth. Attention was also given to a presentation on the three-year Housing strategy for years 2019-2021, including creating new homes, strengthening existing homes, improving health and well-being via improving housing, and working collaboratively in partnerships. The presentation noted the challenges in recent months to be able to work with tenants and residents face to face. Details were provided as to how Housing services were responding to an increasing demand for housing solutions that accommodate individuals with specific disabilities or unique needs.

Further, an update was provided around several services that were suspended because of COVID-19 that were now being stood back up. The presentation highlighted areas of the Borough where schemes have successfully opened new homes and properties. Aims for recovery following COVID-19 were also addressed, specifically in terms of returning services to full operation, taking into account lessons learned about efficient ways of working under new restrictions. It was noted that almost all rough-sleepers in the Borough were now off the streets, even though homelessness has risen and was expected to rise following the pandemic.

In discussion, Members asked for further information about any plans for modernisation or redesign of council houses. The response emphasised the need to assess the costs, including opportunity cost, associated with remodelling, but affirmed that the homes were kept up to the required standards.

Members also sought clarification as to how many of the homes were occupied and the origin of the target numbers. The response affirmed that every five years an analysis of the housing market was carried out, from which the figures were derived that indicate these anticipated changes in demand for various types of housing. Further, it was noted that the occupation of properties was not tracked, but it was likely that the newly constructed buildings were being sold upon completion. It was also noted that just over 300 sites in the Borough were being considered for developments. Each Ward Member was to receive an information pack about these sites in question. These packs are designed to help capture local knowledge and insight that may be available. It was further noted that within the next two to three weeks, Members were to be emailed these lists of potential future sites and invited to provide feedback.

Further detail was requested as to how the service will respond to increasing demand for social housing following the current and anticipated economic downturn, specifically in terms of strategic acquisitions as a way to replenish housing stocks. In response, officers described a current initiative to buy bungalows by working directly with builders and with organisations such as Red Mile.

Members expressed concern that plans were in place to protect residents at risk of homelessness once the end of the rent embargo arrived. In response, officers explained that this year, the number of such needs had risen from 35 to 89. Hotel accommodation has also been utilised this year, which had not been the case in the past. It was further noted that private landlords were expected to be responsible in the circumstances and not carry out unnecessary evictions. Members were assured that numbers were monitored and analysed on a weekly basis.

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION- 09/06/20

Members were interested in more information about the Tenant Engagement Framework. The response indicated that the strategy group was to meet the following week to work out how best to ensure business continuity via virtual communication. It was noted that resources were allocated at the ward level and that the decisions were to be taken from tenants to ward members so that funds were spent for the things that really mattered to tenants.

Members wished to know if, given the demographic facts about increasing population in Rotherham, the design of new-built residences had taken into account specific needs for the older age group. The response affirmed that the increasing demographic was very much being considered. Apartments were being designed to include a lift, to be offered as shared ownership, and to allow people to downsize. It was noted that it would not be possible to provide enough land to meet the demand for bungalows, so some of what was needed was smaller homes with stairlifts. Therefore, the tenure and design of these homes had been carefully planned and considered.

Members inquired about the future of a specific site in the Borough. In response, officers explained that sites were sometimes not designated as Housing, but rather were organised in the general fund. Therefore, the Housing Service worked closely with Regeneration and Environment and with the Asset Management Board to consider a range of possibilities for surface assets, like these sites, with Housing as a consistent early consideration. A full strategic assessment was routinely conducted and changes in use considered where appropriate. The financial implications were also considered before determining whether it made sense to develop through the HRA or to auction. With regard to the Brinsworth Library site in particular, officers offered to look into it and return an answer after the meeting.

Clarification was requested about the service's 100% compliance rate on Gas Safety checks and any safety check refusals. Officers identified that the rate has consistently hovered at or above 99%. As a matter of policy, contractors did not go into a property where the resident was shielding or needing to isolate upon having contracted the virus. In such cases, the service revised the safety check schedule and made a new appointment.

Members expressed curiosity as to how the Town Centre was developing despite setbacks associated with the pandemic. The response supplied information about an initial hiccup in the work process with the contractor that has now been worked out, such that the contractor was now currently performing building activities that could be undertaken safely. Officers reported that demolition works had started, and the holdings had gone up near the swimming pool site. The response was a resounding yes, that the sites were progressing such that the homes in the Town Centre would be able to be delivered.

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION - 09/06/20

Members also pointed out that the Housing figures also appear in the upcoming Cabinet agenda papers. Clarification was sought as to whether the Old Oaks Day Centre site had been released and whether Housing had any plan to take this site over. In response, the officers offered to find out about the status of the specific site and inform Members.

Members requested further clarification around progress at other specific sites. The response provided an update that the bungalows and homes in question had been completed and lettings were taking place soon. It was noted that during the pandemic, homeless lettings had been prioritised, but general lettings were now also a returning priority.

Members wished to know more about the total number of strategic acquisitions over the last year and the associated costs. Members were informed that there have been 130 so far this year. For reference, there were 3 in the previous financial year. The Cabinet Member for Housing also added that the Local Lettings Criteria where applicable were followed, which meant that half of the lettings were reserved for people from the village area. These Criteria were put into place 5-6 years ago and may be ready for review. Members reiterated the request that the associated costs be circulated.

Members also wondered if former school buildings and the associated land could be examined by the Asset Management Board. Officers noted that the properties will be examined by the Asset Management Board, and that if they are appropriate for housing development, this would be ascertained. Officers offered to raise this question at the Asset Management Board Meeting as part of a combined discussion about CYPS assets.

Resolved:-

1. That when the Social Value Policy is presented for review by Overview and Scrutiny Management Board, the Housing-specific issues be highlighted within that report.
2. That the Housing-related elements of the Covid-19 recovery plan be considered for scrutiny.
3. That the progress update in respect of the Housing Strategy be noted.

72. INITIAL WORK PROGRAMME 2020-21 MUNICIPAL YEAR

Consideration was given to a report providing a draft of the Improving Places Select Commission Initial Work Programme for the 2020-21 municipal year. The purpose of the report was to invite Members to contribute ideas and suggestions to be incorporated into a final draft of the Work Programme. The report provided a summary of the remit and goals for scrutiny and the various means available to perform scrutiny work in the upcoming year. The report also included guidance for selection and prioritisation of work items to be included the Work Programme.

In discussion, Members raised a few points for further consideration as part of compiling the final draft of the Work Programme.

Members wished to consider how the work programme could be made broader in its effect, so that the work benefits as many people in the Borough as possible.

Members voiced the suggestion that the Major Incident Plan be prioritised in the Work Programme with the threat of future floods in mind.

Members suggested it could be useful to have a COVID-19 impact assessment, to help identify what work could be undertaken and to inform us about the consequences of our efforts for residents while the pandemic is going on. It was noted that Culture, sport and tourism currently appears late on our program and we might somehow bring something forward that will help us to transform our green spaces to design for accessibility during the COVID restrictions.

Members voiced concerns that the Town Centre Master Plan may also need to be considered with a broader remit, such that business continuity in the Town Centre itself might be effectively supported. Members also expressed concern for small shops throughout the Borough not just in the Town Centre.

Members underscored the importance of careful prioritisation of Work Programme items in view of the fact that the magnitude of devastating effects was as yet unable to be foreseen, and that it was of course inadvisable to attempt to achieve everything on the Work Programme within the next three months.

Members also referenced valuable resources in association with Sheffield City Region and South Yorkshire scrutiny for informing the response to the emerging needs of businesses, an estimated 40% of which could be struggling after COVID-19. It was noted that not only the larger businesses merited support, rather, grants were to be distributed across all of South Yorkshire.

Resolved:-

1. That the Improving Places Select Commission give consideration to an outline work programme using the draft set out in Appendix 1 as a basis for the discussion.
2. That the Chair and Governance Advisor meet with the relevant Cabinet members and link officer for IPSC to receive feedback on these proposed areas of work.
3. A final report proposing the formal work programme for 2020-21 will be submitted to the meeting in July of 2020 in order for Members to agree a clear set of priorities for this municipal year.

73. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of urgent business.

74. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

The Chair announced that the next virtual meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission will be held on 14 July 2020 at 1.30 pm.