

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday, 14th July, 2020**

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

Also present were Co-optees representing Rotherfed Ms. M. Jacques and Ms. K. Bacon.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors B. Cutts; Jepsen; and Beck, the Cabinet Member for Housing.

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

75. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 9 JUNE 2020

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 9 June 2020, were approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

76. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

A personal interest was declared in respect of Council tenancy by Councillor Rose McNeely.

77. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

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

78. 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.

79. COMMUNICATIONS

There were no communications presented.

80. HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION AND ROUGH SLEEPER STRATEGY 2019-22 - PROGRESS UPDATE

Consideration was given to a report providing a progress update on performance within the 2019-20 reporting period and the first two months of 2020-2021, up to the end of May 2020. The six key aims of the Strategy were identified: to support people with complex needs; to prevent homelessness and offer rapid housing solutions; to increase support prevent homelessness among young people; to end rough sleeping and begging in Rotherham; to improve access to tenancy support,

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employment and health support services; and to ensure there is enough emergency accommodation. Progress toward these aims was outlined in the report, by means of graphs and charts of performance figures. These figures indicated that this year has presented 15% more cases of homelessness than the previous year. This increase is due to legislation now being embedded such that other agencies were now referring homeless people to the service. Escalation triggers had therefore been introduced to flag business critical areas so that responses and resources could be deployed to implement solutions. Caseloads had started to increase towards the end of March 2020; however, the average caseload reduced when more staff were subsequently recruited to the team—with further staff expected to be recruited in the next six months. Figures were presented as to both increasing and declining trends in homelessness, and the three-phase response method was illustrated. Progress against each of the Strategy's six aims was specified and projections for expansions and partnership efforts in the coming six months were described.

In discussion, Members requested that assurances be provided that the end of the evictions embargo would not bring demand beyond what can be accommodated. Officers provided assurances that more staff were being recruited and trained and would be ready to meet any demand. The courts were taking a gradual approach to conduct a set number per week. The Council will have three of those slots per week. It has been made clear that unless there are extreme circumstances the preference would be in favour of defendants. As for private-landlord tenants who have been served notice, the team were already working with those individuals. There was a sophisticated dashboard that was in regular use for monitoring trends as they emerged.

Members also requested clarification around how long it might be before households in temporary accommodation could be provided with something more permanent. Officers provided assurances that the service had already accommodated many of the people in need. It was clarified that it had not been the same people throughout the measurement period who had made up the total number tallied. The people all had had move on plans. A twice-weekly visit was conducted for documentation and monitoring service delivery such as meals provision. Everyone was moved on to more permanent housing as soon as possible.

Members asked if there was a way to route charity funds toward Shiloh. Officers explained that funding sources were never guaranteed, although funding had increased over the last few years. In cases where staff salaries were grant funded, those jobs were not secure, and staff often left for jobs with better security. Thankfully, Rotherham had brought funding in, for example, from Crisis UK. It was noted that the Service strived to draw funding from a variety of sources, not only Council funding. The benefits of raise awareness of the services that are available and actively helping people was also emphasised, in hopes that more people would know where they can give moneys that really help the people who are

most in need. It was noted that a significant accomplishment of the Housing Team has been to bring in bids to meet the need. It was also noted that the staff in the team often moved on to promotion in other teams. Although the team would never be able to get years upon years of guaranteed funding, the team would continue to be resourceful to meet the need. It was suggested that officers would provide an answer in writing regarding the process when renters cannot continue to rent because the landlord wishes to sell.

Members requested further elaboration around the partnership with Shiloh. Officers explained the day-to-day operational collaborations with Shiloh, including the initial arrangement of a phone call or a visit with anyone whom Shiloh thinks could use the help of the service. Under normal circumstances, an outreach surgery was held at Shiloh up to twice a week, with the goal of expanding to three times a week once staffing allows. During the pandemic, Shiloh has provided meals, speaking to officers each day to ascertain the number of meals needed, etc. Together with Shiloh, the team had collaboratively looked for funding to help people find support for private-rented accommodation.

Additional clarification was requested regarding the reason for a spike in homelessness among people in the 25-40 age group. In response, it was stated that the primary demographic is single males with the primary cause of relationship breakdown.

Members commended the efforts of the Homelessness Team and observed that the Homelessness Team were doing excellent work.

Resolved:-

1. That the progress update in respect of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy be noted.

81. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT - RENTS AND SERVICE CHARGES - RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC AND FUTURE PROVISION

Consideration was given to a report outlining the success of the new service model for the Housing Income Recovery Service, which was restructured in 2018; the response to the pandemic; and the development of future provision. The Transformation Programme was designed to reflect current thinking in the field and had been built upon a set of principles encompassing contemporary operational practices, placing the customer at the heart of the service delivery model, despite the service having the ability to deliver life changing sanctions.

The outcome of the 2018 Transformation Programme was to create a Housing Income Recovery Service, restructured and very specifically focussed on maximising housing income in all its forms, with a joining up of responsibility for the collection of both current and former tenants' rent

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arrears. In addition, a new and better-equipped Financial Inclusion and Tenancy Support Service was created. This part of the service developed and delivered practical interventions and projects to enable tenants to get the maximum benefit from their income.

In 2019, the Advocacy and Appeals Team also became part of the Financial Inclusion Service, to deliver debt advice and specialist benefit advice to people living with cancer. The appeals part of the service supported people with appeals on Employment Support Allowance (ESA). It was shown through quantitative figures and qualitative individual narratives that the Appeals part of the service has a strong performance record of making a difference in material outcomes for individuals.

The success of the transformation of the Housing Income Service was demonstrated through performance data. Although official year-end data was forthcoming via Housemark, RMBC outperformed all others in the Northern Benchmarking group (which include organisations such as Sheffield CC, Hull CC, Wakefield, St Leger Homes, Nottingham) on rent collection. At the end of the 2019/20 financial year, rent collection was the highest for over a decade.

Facts and figures were presented to show how many properties of which types the Council managed as well as information around how the pandemic had affected rents collection and tenant arrears. It was remarked that there had been on average a £5.17 decrease in the balance of residents in arrears. It was noted that the team had won awards and had developed a reputation for sharing good practice.

It was observed that the period of the pandemic and initial recovery had shown that the service was not only high performing but also able to flex to meet the needs of its customers with staff maintaining high levels of performance while working from home. It was noted that practical support and advice had been developed and sent to all tenants through a leaflet developed in response to the pandemic. Collaborations had been undertaken with the Employment Solutions Team within Financial Inclusion to help meet the emerging needs of tenants following the pandemic. These efforts included provision of technology courses and support for finding work opportunities, preparing for interviews, or with moving to an area where work could be obtained. Other efforts including redeployment of staff to meet the demand for Universal Credit applications processing were also described. Finally, it was advised that projections for the future could be made only cautiously, as the pandemic continued to play out with possible extended furloughs and the possibility of debt that could be offset by Universal Credit or other benefits.

In discussion, Members commended the teams for their work. Appreciation for the information design in the leaflet was also expressed.

Members requested additional clarification around whether arrears were caused by the Bedroom Tax. Assurances were provided that clear

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communication was maintained with tenants about what their responsibilities would be and any financial implications for the Bedroom Tax on residents would be clear. This tax was only on those who are on UC or Housing Benefit who were not of retirement age, which means many tenants are not responsible to pay it. Nevertheless, support was provided to tenants if needed. Ultimately, it was a political decision whether or not the Bedroom Tax was collected, which was outside the purview of officers.

Members also inquired as to the trigger points that the team were monitoring to ensure the earliest, most effective response. It was clarified that a sophisticated IT kit, operating on a series of algorithms, was utilised to track tenant payment history over the past 12 months. The kit identified changes in payment behaviour, so that at the point of need, the team could draw on that intelligence to take the recommended action to support the tenant. The team also were responsible to follow government protocols, which require the consideration of factors such as whether the tenant in question has been identified as a vulnerable tenant, for example. The importance of keeping people with a roof over their heads was emphasised, and not only for the cost savings involved; therefore, the team strive to sustain tenancies even under these kinds of circumstances. Nevertheless, there were some tenants who could not and would not pay, and as a last resort those cases would have to go to court, albeit as a last resort.

Further inquiry was made into the measures in place that ensure the team are operating on the very latest information from government. The response explained that the team utilised a number of training platforms to ensure every staff member kept current with the latest information and best practice. It was noted that the Financial Inclusion team leader had continued to conduct virtual training Teams meetings on the changing government guidance throughout the pandemic so that all team members stayed fully informed.

Members also expressed curiosity as to how the team responded to residents who preferred to pay in cash. In response, officers noted that while cash is an option, the preferred method of payment was now by recurrent debit card payment rather than by bank transfer, because this payment type precluded additional fees to the payer if it happened that there were insufficient funds to cover the payment.

A further question was asked about the possibility of investigating a specific individual case, to which it was agreed a response would follow outside of the meeting.

Further elaboration was requested around expanding the appeals team based on the profound positive effects of their work so far. Officers responded that a further staff member would be recruited to be added to the team as an initial measure. It was noted that the team were recently relocated from R&E into Housing Financial Inclusion, which represented a

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change from a corporate service to a service now available more broadly to all tenants and residents. This restructuring formed part of the next phase of the Advice Service Review.

Members also expressed interest in more information about how the Service responded to debts of people on Universal Credit. In response, officers provided assurances that at the start of COVID-19 pandemic, the government chose to increase the amount of UC people could receive for the year by about a thousand pounds. The service also had supported anyone with a claims benefit to make a Universal Credit claim. Using a system allowing members of the team to directly access and see the status of the claim at any time, the team also helped claimants. Teams also screened potential new tenancies and monitored for any new redundancies at the end of the furlough scheme. Furthermore, eight new staff were being trained to support people into employment and skills training to meet that upcoming need. It was stated that this was because Universal Credit was not the long-term answer, but the answer was to support people into skills and employment.

Members also expressed the desire to know more about the kinds of contracts which would still be possible after the E.U. exit. Officers responded that contracts both temporary and permanent would still be available, and that there were further project announcements through Sheffield City Region through 2022.

Resolved:-

1. That the details of the report be noted.
2. That a further update in respect of Rents and Service Charges be provided in six months or at an appropriate future date.
3. That the outcome of the Advice Service Review be circulated as part of the next update in respect of Rents and Service Charges.

82. IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION WORK PROGRAMME 2020-21

Consideration was given to a revised work programme and schedule that had been compiled in consultation with officers and Members. It was emphasised that an update in respect of progress toward the priorities would be provided at subsequent meetings of the Commission. It was emphasised that these priorities also have been planned with a degree of flexibility built in to accommodate matters that may come up, especially as the Council responds to the current pandemic situation. Members and officers were thanked for their contributions to the work programme.

Resolved:-

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1. That approval be given to the work programme for the 2020-21 municipal year as set out in Appendix 1 of the report.
2. That authority be delegated to the Chair, in consultation with the Governance Advisor, to amend the work programme in between Commissions as appropriate.

83. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that there were no items of business requiring urgent consideration by the Commission.

84. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

The Chair announced that the next virtual meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission was scheduled for 8 September 2020, commencing at 1.30 pm.