

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday 19 March 2024**

Present:- Councillor Wyatt (in the Chair); Councillors Andrews, Bennett-Sylvester, C Carter, T. Collingham, Cowen, Ellis, Khan, McNeely and Tinsley (Vice Chair) and co-opted members Mrs. M. Jacques, and Mrs. K. Bacon, representing Rotherham Federation of Communities.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Atkin, Aveyard, Havard and Taylor.

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

58. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 6 FEBRUARY 2024

Resolved:

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 6 February 2024 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

59. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

60. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

The Chair advised that there were no members of the public or representatives of media organisations present at the meeting and there were no questions in respect of matters on the agenda.

61. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Chair advised that there were no items of business on the agenda that would require the exclusion of the press or public from the meeting.

62. TENANTS SCRUTINY PANEL REVIEW - VOIDS LETTABLE STANDARD

The Chair explained this item was to highlight the work that the Tenant Scrutiny Panel had carried out on Voids and the lettable standards of those Voids. This was work that the Tenant Scrutiny Panel felt they could add value to, and he expressed his thanks to the work of the Panel. He then welcomed Lynsey Stephenson, Head of Housing Property Service to the meeting.

The Head of Housing Property Service echoed her thanks to the Tenant Scrutiny Panel for the comprehensive review which focused on the lettable standards involved with the termination and re-letting process.

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION - 19/03/24

The Panel looked at benchmarking with other housing providers to assess their lettable standards. They conducted property inspections before and after work to evaluate the conditions left by outgoing tenants and the state of properties upon completion. Consultations were held with various staff members, including voids supervisors and cleaning staff. Additionally, communications with tenants were also reviewed during the review, including termination letters, and termination forms. Feedback from tenants, both outgoing and incoming, was gathered to inform the formulation of eleven recommendations.

The Housing Property Service had considered each recommendation carefully, and an action plan was developed detailing how to progress them. While some recommendations had not been pursued due to contractual limitations or existing practices, efforts had been made to align with legislative changes and ensure properties met necessary standards, including the installation of carbon monoxide and smoke alarms.

It was highlighted that certain examples, such as those concerning gas testing turnaround times, were discussed. It was noted that reducing such turnaround times might require additional resources, such as more appointment slots and standby staff, which could potentially impact other aspects of the service and further investigation was needed in those areas. Furthermore, observations were made regarding items not currently included in the lettable standard, such as surfing curtain battens, clothes posts, and fencing, which are practiced by other housing providers. While acknowledging these observations, it was emphasised that the tenancy agreement clearly outlines tenant responsibilities for such items. It was clarified that while these considerations are not discounted, implementing them may incur additional costs that could affect other service elements. Each recommendation was addressed with various actions, some already completed and closed, others yet to be progressed, and some currently under investigation.

The Chair expressed gratitude for the service work and raised concerns about costs, emphasising that any extensions would impact the housing revenue account, also he sought clarification regarding smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms.

The Head of Housing Property Service explained that legislation mandates carbon monoxide alarms and highlighted access issues, such as with fire doors, affecting existing tenants. She described efforts to replace fire doors and emphasised the importance of maintaining proper fire protection levels, also she mentioned that in December they successfully took someone to court because they had been persistently not allowing access to replace the fire door. She also mentioned conducting fixed wire tests and installing carbon monoxide and smoke detectors during void processes to ensure compliance. The Head of Housing Property Service acknowledged slight variations from the void's standard but stressed agreement with contractors on these practices. Additionally, she discussed the need to address loft insulation to meet

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION- 19/03/24

energy efficiency targets, aiming to minimise disruption for tenants during property turnover. Additionally, she highlighted the adherence to recommendations from the Scrutiny Panel, suggesting the potential for expediting property turnover. They considered delaying kitchen renovations and replacing only if necessary, prioritising minimal disruption for tenants. As a result, they aim to carry out such renovations during void periods.

The Chair expressed concerns regarding decorating allowances, noting that it is not often highlighted. He recalled a time when decorating allowances were more common, acknowledging that times have changed. However, he suggested that there's still room for discretion in certain circumstances, especially with the assistance of housing managers. Also, he pointed out that such allowances would incur costs with each letting, potentially affecting overall expenses.

Councillor McNeely highlighted a few important things. Firstly, when visiting somebody who was going to vacate you usually witnessed a fully furnished house and you found some of the faults once the furniture had been removed so she suggested getting a double check procedure. Secondly, she acknowledged that some properties may remain void for longer periods depending on the amount of work that needed to be done. She also recognised that certain properties were being kept vacant for emergency purposes. However, she expressed concern about residents' perceptions when they saw properties unoccupied for extended periods. She suggested establishing a system to inform surrounding residents of the reason for a property's vacancy, particularly when kept empty for emergency purposes.

The Head of Housing Property Service responded that we do not conduct pre-tenant termination inspections for all types of properties. She pointed out that they aimed to do so, but they had faced challenges in doing it consistently due to resource constraints. However, she agreed that these inspections were crucial, especially when tenants were transferring to another council property and their current residence required significant repairs. She said that ideally, the Council would stop their transfer until the damages were rectified, but unfortunately, resource limitations hindered the service's ability to conduct pre-termination inspections universally. Instead, properties got inspected when they become void, identifying any damages caused by the tenant and levying charges accordingly.

Regarding long-term vacant properties the Head of Housing Property Service noted that, ideally, the Council should not have any, as it maintained a temporary accommodation portfolio. It was pointed out that these properties should only remain vacant for a short period, typically days or weeks, before accommodating homeless applicants. However, she highlighted that, sometimes properties could remain empty for extended periods due to legal processes, such as when tenants entered residential care or when there were court arrangements confirming

permanent residency in such care. During those periods, neighbours and residents may perceive the property as abandoned, leading to enquiries or concerns. However, she noted that such communications must be handled sensitively, adhering to GDPR regulations and maintaining privacy regarding tenants' situations.

Councillor Bennett-Sylvester highlighted a common issue where properties remain vacant for extended periods due to safety concerns or other community requirements. He cited an example in Dalton where a property remained empty for 12 months under similar circumstances. Councillor Bennett-Sylvester emphasised the importance of communication with residents, noting that enquiries often arose when properties remain empty for extended periods. He suggested using estate agent-type boards to inform residents when a property would become available for letting, thus improving communication and transparency. He stressed the need for simple and clear communication to address concerns about vacant properties.

He also highlighted some common issues found through casework, such as neglected gardens and missing bins upon moving into new properties. These issues seem to arise particularly in rapid rehousing scenarios, prompting the need for follow-up and system improvements. Additionally, he mentioned concerns about the effectiveness of decorating vouchers and their potential impact on certain neighbourhoods. He questioned whether specific properties facing difficulty in being let could receive additional assistance such as a decorating voucher, as part of the overall letting policy. These thoughts raised further considerations for policy adjustments and support measures.

The Head of Housing Property Service explained that sometimes properties required immediate attention, so overgrown gardens and missing bins were addressed to ensure the premises was presentable for new tenants. However, she noted that if the property remained vacant for more than 30 days, especially during the summer when grass grew quickly it was hard to maintain that standard. She also highlighted that occasionally, neighbours may take advantage of the situation and remove bins, although this did not happen frequently. Those issues usually got discovered during inspections with incoming tenants, prompting them to order replacements as needed. Regarding decorating vouchers and hard-to-let properties, the Head of Housing Property Service pointed out that the Council took specific measures for exceptionally challenging properties. After exhausting the shortlist without success and deeming them unsuitable, the Council may furnish and decorate the properties to make them more appealing to potential tenants. However, those actions were taken on a case-by-case basis to avoid setting unfair precedents or leaving properties vacant for extended periods.

Councillor Collingham highlighted the issue with decoration and pointed out a case in his ward where a resident had recently fitted new curtains and carpets, but unfortunately passed away soon after. He questioned

whether it was part of the housing policy that newly fitted carpets or curtains were removed, when a property changed tenants, expressing concern about the potential waste.

The Head of Housing Property Service responded, explaining that removing carpets and curtains were indeed part of their standard policy outlined in the lettable standard. However, she acknowledged the need to consider exceptional circumstances, suggesting that they could speak to the incoming tenant in such cases. She noted past challenges where leaving the carpet led to complications if the new tenant declined it, resulting in additional costs. She explained the pricing structure with contractors and the necessity to remove carpets even if they are in good condition to avoid such issues. She also mentioned concerns about pests in the carpet, stating that while they do not typically fumigate as part of the removal process, they ensured proper disposal.

The Chair responded, acknowledging the complexities involved in the removal of items like curtains and carpets, considering both environmental impact and potential hygiene issues. He expressed appreciation for bringing forward the recommendations from the tenant scrutiny panel, noting that no additional recommendations were identified. He confirmed agreement with the proposed actions and highlighted the standard procedure of reviewing progress in 12 months' time. The Chair concluded by expressing gratitude and readiness to proceed with the next steps.

Resolved:

1. That Improving Places Select Commission noted the outcome of the Tenant Scrutiny Review, the actions proposed to deal with each recommendation and progress made to date.
2. Agreed that a further report detailing progress be presented to Improving Places Select Commission in 12 months.

63. UPDATE: TENANTS SCRUTINY PANEL REVIEW - IMPROVING COMMUNICATION WITH TENANTS

The Chair welcomed James Smith, Tenant Engagement Manager to present a progress update on delivery of the action plan that was developed in response to the Tenant Scrutiny Panel investigation into how the Council could improve communications with tenants. It was a wide-ranging review that spanned many services because communication affected everyone.

He explained that communicating with tenants was intertwined with the consumer regulations and the action plan was a good starting point with more work to be conducted.

The Tenant Engagement Manager recaptured that the initial improving communications report was heard by this Commission on March 2023, the report detailed nine recommendations A - I and a further four suggestions

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION - 19/03/24

made by the Scrutiny Panel, and the report so set out a 12-month review period.

He highlighted that all nine actions and the four further suggestions had been achieved, the Tenant Scrutiny Panel was happy with the progress, and they signed off the plan earlier this year. He pointed out three key outcomes that have helped them to achieve the vast majority of recommendations and further suggestions within the report.

The Website improvements were made as a result of the communication review and included making plans to introduce a housing section to the Council's existing complaints web pages also full review of the tenant engagement website was undertaken. The tenant engagement webpages underwent significant improvements, featuring enhanced interactivity and content co-designed with the dedicated screen team, comprising of tenants who collaborated on various projects. Additionally, he highlighted that tailored communications training had been developed, which was implemented for housing managers and their teams through a train-the-trainer approach. Over the past year, the screen team had played an instrumental role in refining communications, from webpage and web form design to enhancing letters and influencing the Council's Home Matters magazine which was sent to all tenants. Their broad involvement contributed to achieving key outcomes and implementing recommendations.

The Tenant Engagement Manager highlighted that website improvements had directly contributed to meeting recommendations C and D, particularly in terms of website accessibility for tenants.

He noted that staff training had played a significant role in achieving one recommendation. Despite being singular in number, this co-designed training was crucial as it equipped teams with the communication skills vital for interacting effectively with tenants for years to come. The training featured interactive content and customer videos illustrating the impact of good communication on tenants.

The final key outcome in blue on the right-hand side related to our Screen Team, which facilitated the achievement of three recommendations and three further suggestions. Over the initial 12 months, the screen team contributed not only to improving communication effectiveness but also to enhancing accessibility and communication strategy. Their success integrated them into our regular business operations, and they continued to influence communication design and strategy moving forward.

He went on to explain that some of the recommendations fell outside of those three main outcomes, which were detailed below:

Recommendation B was achieved not by one overarching strategy but by a mixture of strategic documents and interventions. The tenant engagement framework and customer access strategy covered how we

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION- 19/03/24

communicated and engaged with tenants and how tenants could access information in a digital format. The consultation and engagement framework set out guidelines for how the Council would consult with tenants, and the introduced training ensured our communications with tenants were effective across housing services.

Recommendation F was achieved through various actions, including robustly monitoring performance and call answering times, supported by a Customer Experience Board chaired by the Chief Executive. This was further underpinned by customer service standards now embedded within Council teams, with extensive work done to roll out these standards.

Recommendation G concerning complaints and compliments was accomplished through our continued focus within past editions of the Home Matters magazine. Articles explained to tenants how they could complain, with further articles being developed for the next edition, emphasising the importance of tenants informing us of any issues they may be experiencing.

Recommendation four was instrumental in shaping the Council's approach to the procurement of a company called Quest Research, which was currently conducting our tenant satisfaction measures survey. Currently, Quest employs a combination of telephone and digital surveys. In line with this recommendation, several online forms to enable tenants to express their opinions via our website had been developed, along with a tenant engagement satisfaction survey.

The Tenant Engagement Manager introduced a video displaying the new website to the panel. The video highlighted three key takeaways: firstly, the previous site felt crowded; secondly, users struggled to access the information they wanted; and thirdly, they felt bombarded with information as a result. The new site addressed these issues by providing easy-to-access tabs across the page.

The improvement of the action plan template was highlighted for the panel. He informed that the previous action plan contained only one recommendation, a couple of dates, and some updates, making it difficult to ascertain who was responsible for each task. The updated template had been tweaked to address those issues.

The Chair enquired about the completion date for Quest Research's work and the resulting report, as well as seeking clarification on the Tpas logo seen in a video. James explained that Quest Research's two-year contract was nearing its end, with data consolidation underway for submission to the regulator before April. Regarding Tpas reaccreditation, all actions were completed, and the next assessment was scheduled for September.

Councillor Carter sought clarification on the scope of the training and its recipients, particularly enquiring about its extension to repair personnel

interacting with council tenants.

The Tenant Engagement Manager explained that the training encompassed various sections, including fostering positive first interactions with tenants, effective communication methods, active listening techniques, and empathy building. Initially planned for a few hours, the training evolved into a full-day session. It was rolled out to all housing managers across departments, with at least two managers from each department participating. The training adopted a train-the-trainer approach, with managers tasked to train their staff. Discussions also arose about extending the training to contractors involved in property repairs.

Councillor McNeely emphasised the importance of transparency in communications, suggesting that alongside "you asked, we did," there should also be acknowledgement of instances where requests were not fulfilled, along with the reasons why. The Tenant Engagement Manager acknowledged this point, stating that he was currently discussing this aspect with housing teams, particularly regarding tenant scrutiny. He emphasised the need to communicate both completed actions and reasons for unfulfilled requests.

Resolved:

1. That the Improving Places Select Commission noted the progress made in delivering the scrutiny review action plan.
2. That information be provided to the Improving Places Select Commission on the completion date for Quest's work.

64. SCRUTINY REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS – NATURE RECOVERY

The Chair proceeded with the Scrutiny Review Recommendation conducted on Nature Recovery. The Commission considered a range of activity including response to climate change, and the aligned causes of the nature crisis. This extensive piece of work began in March last year and concluded towards the end of the previous calendar year. It involved various external organisations and individual experts, all of whom contributed significantly to the review and the Chair expressed his thanks to all of the individuals and partner agencies who contributed to the review. The Chair expressed gratitude to Katherine Harclerode and Caroline Webb, acknowledging their valuable input.

Twelve recommendations were made as a result of the motion to the Council, detailed in the report and appendices. Whilst unusual this review had been considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board first, this was to ensure it was expedited within this municipal year. The recommendations would now move to the Cabinet for further consideration, with the hope that they provided a solid foundation for future action, supported by external expert organisations.

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION- 19/03/24

Resolved: That the Improving Places Select Commission noted the report from the Head of Democratic Services outlining the findings and recommendations from the Scrutiny Review of Nature Recovery undertaken by Members from Improving Places Select Commission which was presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board on 13 March 2024.

65. IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION - WORK PROGRAMME 2023-2024

Consideration was given to the Work Programme circulated with the agenda.

The work program was discussed, highlighting various topics to be covered and recurring items. Additionally, a member of the public suggested considering developments in Herringthorpe for scrutiny, although it's uncertain how it would fit in given the committee's scope as it related to a planning matter.

Councillor Tinsley raised a time-critical issue regarding the government's public consultation on permitted development rights. The consultation includes proposals for enlarging homes, upward extensions, demolition and rebuilding, electric charging points, and air source heat pumps. These changes could potentially allow significant developments without the need for planning permission. He noted that the closing date for consultation was 9 April 2024.

Councillor Tinsley highlighted the importance of addressing these proposals promptly, as they could impact planning regulations in the future. He noted examples where permitted development led to significant changes without planning permission, emphasising the need for careful consideration and potential feedback to the Planning Board.

The Chair emphasised the importance of ensuring a response from officers in Planning to the consultation on changing permitted development rights to avoid potential negative impacts on constituents in the future. They suggested forwarding the matter to planning officers to discuss what response they may submit in consultation with the Planning Board members.

Regarding the work programme, the Cllr expressed a desire to see what the next council year brings for the Commission and noted that items listed for the next Commission will be considered for discussion in the new municipal year.

Resolved: That the Improving Places Select Commission recommended that officers in Planning feed into the Government's consultation on permitted development rights.

IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION - 19/03/24

66. URGENT BUSINESS

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

67. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

Resolved: That the next meeting of the Improving Places Select Commission will take place on 4 June 2024 commencing at 1:30pm.