

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD
20th December, 2019

Present:- Councillor Steele (in the Chair); Councillors R. Elliott, Jarvis, Jepson, Mallinder, Taylor, Tweed, Walsh and Wyatt.

Apologies were received from Councillors Cowles, Cusworth and Keenan.

The webcast of the Council Meeting can be viewed at:-

<https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home>

92. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Resolved:-

That the minutes of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board held on 2 and 16 October and 27 November 2019 be approved as true and correct records of the proceedings.

93. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Wyatt declared a personal interest in agenda item 6 (Housing Revenue Account Rents and Services Charges 2020-21) on the basis that a family member was a council tenant.

94. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

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

95. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

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

96. ADULT SERVICES NON-RESIDENTIAL CARE CHARGING POLICY PROPOSALS

Consideration was given to a report which was submitted for pre-decision scrutiny ahead of the Cabinet meeting scheduled for 23 December 2019, that presented policy proposals in respect charges for non-residential adult care services following a detailed consultation process with the public, service users and support agencies which had taken place between July and September 2019. The report provided details in respect of the feedback received during the consultation.

It was reported that in December 2018, the Cabinet had previously approved consultation with service users, carers, providers and support agencies to inform proposed changes to the current policy and provide opportunities for feedback on the proposals set out below:-

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- Proposal 1 - To remove the current maximum charge and to charge those people who can afford it the full cost of the services that are provided to them
- Proposal 2 - Under the new framework, those who can afford it would be charged for the total number of carers attending and providing services, which would mean introducing a charge where more than one carer is provided at the same time
- Proposal 3 - It is proposed that the liability for charges be from the date on which the service commences, so people will be asked to pay the accrued charges for the services they have received following completion of a financial assessment
- Proposal 4 - To include the full value high rate Attendance Allowance or Disability Living Allowance, or the enhanced daily living component of Personal Independence Payments, when carrying out non-residential financial assessments
- Proposal 5 – To review our current policy to determine whether our allowance is fair and equitable across Rotherham and to consider putting in place a standard list or rate of allowances, in line with our neighbouring authorities.

It was noted that a number of responses were received after the closing date of the consultation on 29 September 2019, but these had also been included on the basis that it was important to capture as many views as possible from those affected or potentially affected by the proposed changes.

Members sought to understand the impact of the changes on individuals and requested clarification on whether the changes applied to people living in their own homes and how their ability to pay would be assessed. In response, it was confirmed that there were minimum income guarantees in place for service users still resident in their own homes. Furthermore, financial assessments were expected to be undertaken within three weeks of the service need being established with the user. Officers would be mindful of individual circumstances and each case would be assessed on its merit with the aim of causing hardship to individuals. Officers reiterated that the safety of the service user was the paramount consideration for the Adult Care service and was a requirement under the Care Act 2014. Members were reassured that service users would be advised by experienced officers in respect of changes to two charging processes, which was at the essence of the report before the Board.

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Concerns were expressed in respect of the approach to consulting on the proposals, with comments made to note that a sense of broader public opinion was captured in a less formal way. It was also noted that no consultation sessions had been held in the south of the borough, although this was corrected by the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health who referenced a session which had taken place in Maltby. Furthermore, the consultation had been deemed as fit for purpose and the feedback had been used to develop the proposals presented for determination in the report.

Members sought to understand the specific feedback in the consultation from unpaid carers. Whilst this information was not able to be provided in the meeting. It was later confirmed by the Assistant Director of Strategic Commissioning that it would not be possible to provide such a specific breakdown.

Resolved:-

1. That Cabinet be advised that the recommendations be supported.
2. That an update report on the implementation of the policy be submitted to the Health Select Commission after twelve months of operation in April 2021.
3. That Cabinet ensure that all future consultation and engagement exercises which involve drop-in sessions for the public be arranged in locations which are in the north, south and centre of the borough, with specific consideration to be given to using Members to facilitate consultation events, where appropriate.

97. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN 2020-21

Consideration was given to a report presented for pre-decision scrutiny ahead of the Cabinet meeting scheduled for 23 December 2019, which provided a detailed technical overview of the current position of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan and the reasons for changes to the plan.

It was reported that the Housing Revenue Account recorded all expenditure and income relating to the provision of council housing and related services, and the Council was required to produce a HRA Business Plan setting out its investment priorities over a 30 year period. Following the introduction in 2012 of HRA self-financing, the Council was awarded control over its HRA in return for taking on a proportion of national housing debt.

It was noted that since the last update to the plan, there had been no significant government policy changes that affected the business plan, however there were still some policies that had impacted on the plan:

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- Roll out of full service Universal Credit to all remaining working age tenants in Rotherham since July 2018 onwards
- Ongoing Right to Buy eligibility
- Updated Guidance on Social rents permitting increases of CPI + 1% from 2020-21 onwards.

The Business Plan recognised the importance of continuing investment in new affordable homes, focused on the next five years and would continue to be amended and reported annually. Given the economic uncertainty the overall position remained challenging, but in view of the level of reserves and the previous decision to defer some investment in stock until later in the plan the ability to divert resources to fund housing growth and contribute to the Council Plan remained.

Members noted that, over the short to medium term forecast, the Business Plan showed a sustainable level of cash flow and balances; however over the longer term there would be a significant squeeze on resources due to inflationary pressures. It was further noted that the key risks in the Business Plan were increased Right to Buy sales above those planned for, interest rate rises above those planned and inflation. Those risks were monitored continuously and mitigated by the Housing Service with support from Financial Services.

Concerns were expressed that the level of rent arrears that had been amassed by claimants of Universal Credit and assurances were sought that the authority was responding positively to assist those individuals. In response, it was there were more officers were working closely with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), the government agency responsible for the delivery and implementation of Universal Credit, to mitigate the issue. In addition, officers were also working closely with Rotherham Citizens Advice Bureau and with colleagues in Neighbourhood Services. It was noted that approximately 2,500 tenants were also claimants of Universal Credit and the predictions in respect of bad debts against the HRA were better than forecast, but the arrears issue remained a significant challenge. Following on, the Cabinet Member for Housing confirmed that a political decision was taken to invest in the financial inclusion team in preparation for the impact of Universal Credit on council tenants. This has been successful to some degree when compared to neighbouring authorities.

Members sought clarification in respect of the assumptions for projected Right to Buy sales and what those assumptions were based upon. In response, it was confirmed that the assumptions were informed by historical data, but Members were also reminded that the Business Plan covered a thirty year period and it was difficult to plan in the long term for such eventualities. Assurances were also sought as to the length of time that someone had been a tenant in a council property before they could purchase that property under the Right to Buy Scheme. In response, it was explained that it was difficult to prevent such circumstances, but there were some protections for the authority.

Resolved:-

1. That Cabinet be advised that the recommendations be supported.

98. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT RENTS AND SERVICE CHARGES 2020-2021

Consideration was given to a report which was presented for pre-decision scrutiny ahead of the Cabinet meeting scheduled for 23 December 2019, which sought approval for the proposed values of the housing rents, non-dwelling rents, District Heating and service charges and the draft Housing Revenue Account Budget for 2020/21.

The report proposed the following changes:-

- That housing rents be increased in line with CPI (as at September 2019) plus 1% in 2020/21, therefore an increase of 2.7%. Non-Dwelling Rents
- That an increase in non-dwelling charges be applied in line with the recommended increase being applied across the council of 2% for 2020/21
- No change to District Heating charges

Members queried the practice of letting garages and the sharing of information with ward Members in respect of notifying them of changes to garage usage. In response, it was confirmed that there was work underway to review sites for various reasons and any actions arising from this would not be implemented until ward Members had been consulted.

Reference was made to the previous report on the agenda (minute 97 refers) which had highlighted an increase in the level of arrears amongst tenants who were also claimants of Universal Credit and it was proposed that this be monitored closely with a view to reducing the level of rent arrears. It was also felt that this should be a performance target in the service plan for Housing Services. The Cabinet Member for Housing indicated that he would be happy to accept such recommendations from the Board. To this end, it was agreed that update on performance in this area should be reported to the Improving Places Select Commission in June 2020.

Resolved:-

1. That Cabinet be advised that the recommendations be supported.
2. That the number of Universal Credit claimants be closely monitored with a view to reducing the level of rent arrears from those tenants on that benefit.

3. That consideration be given to including the measure in the service plan for Housing Services and be reported on to Improving Places Select Commission in June 2020.

99. ROTHERHAM TOWN CENTRE PARKING STRATEGY

Consideration was given to a report which was presented for pre-decision scrutiny ahead of the Cabinet meeting scheduled for 23 December 2019 which sought formal adoption of a new Town Centre Parking Strategy, which formed a broad policy statement indicating that the Council would maintain an appropriate level of parking provision which was commensurate with the environmental, development and economic needs of the Town Centre and its businesses, visitors and residents and that the Council would undertake the enforcement of parking activities in a fair, consistent and proportionate manner.

It was reported that the strategy set out the Council's approach to parking in the Town Centre and would help ensure that the following key actions were met:-

- Occupancy levels will be reviewed annually to help ensure that the appropriate level and location of parking provision is maintained.
- The impact on parking capacity of any new development within the town centre will be monitored to manage demand and promote sustainable modes of travel through working with developers.
- Continue to work with the Rotherham Bus Partnership, including local bus operators and SYPT, to improve Rotherham's bus offer, to encourage the use of public transport.
- Consideration will be given to the creation of additional short stay spaces. The service will identify the best locations for "priority customers", such as those with disabilities, and investigate revisions to existing on-street parking restrictions.
- The results of parking 'beat' surveys will be used to indicate where spaces are under-utilised and if they could be reallocated.
- Annually review parking tariffs to ensure that they remain competitive.
- Explore the possibility of the introducing / enhancing the existing Park & Ride provision in relation to the Tram Train pilot.
- Continue the provision of EV charging points.
- Consider the needs of disabled users in all public owned car parks and ensure that key destinations have appropriate levels of disabled parking availability either on or off street.
- Ensure that off-street parking facilities are clean, tidy and user friendly
- A programme of works will be delivered to achieve a high standard of cosmetic finishes to the off-street parking stock. This will be the subject of a regular maintenance schedule thereafter to sustain the high standards.

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- A programme of “pay and display” machine replacement will be developed and funding sought to achieve a full stock of machines with debit/credit card payment facilities including contactless card payment options.

Members welcomed the report and discussed broader issues relating to the provision of car parking and associated services in Rotherham Town Centre. Reference was made to the need to improve the quality of ticketing machinery and accessibility to pay parking charges by phone or app. Likewise, Members shared their experiences, and those of constituents using town centre car parks, in the Wellgate Car Park, where the barrier had frequently been out of use and the payment machines had also been out of order regularly, It was recommended that alternative equipment being investigated to improve the service offer in such locations.

Resolved:-

1. That Cabinet be advised that the recommendation be supported.
2. That the Council take a proactive approach to tackle the dangers of poor lighting at its car parks, as part of a planned approach, given the usage by the public in the early morning/evening during dark hours in the autumn and winter.
3. That the connectivity within the diagram under ‘Strategic Principles’ on page 9 of the strategy be made clear.
4. That the Cabinet, as part of its work to develop car parking, improve the reliability of access/egress equipment at car parks and also seeks to develop, as funding becomes available, the use of mobile applications for customers to pay parking charges in the town centre
5. That the Cabinet gives consideration to the creation of further disabled parking spaces strategically within Rotherham Town Centre.

100. OUTCOMES FROM WORKSHOP ON AREA HOUSING PANELS REVIEW

Councillor Mallinder, Chair of the Improving Places Select Commission, provided a brief update in respect of the work that the Commission had done in a recent workshop on the report to be presented to Cabinet on 23 December 2019 in respect of the review of Area Housing Panels.

It was noted that the following points had been discussed:-

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- Role of Elected Members – providing a community leadership role and ensuring tenants' voice is reflected.
- Consultation responses and how these were reflected in the emerging proposals.
- The range of options for receiving bids for funding including on line applications as well as more 'traditional' methods. Ward Housing Hubs would be flexible to ward needs – there would be different models of engagement, including online platforms, ward walkabouts, meetings etc. Area panels would cease to operate, to be replaced by Ward Housing Hubs.
- Opportunities for cross ward working - however, focus should be on ward priorities – closely aligned to neighbourhood working.
- The annual review of housing stock – funding would be adjusted annually reflecting stock numbers in the Ward
- Steps to encourage people's involvement – particularly in areas where there has been low engagement and there has been a struggle to identify projects or spend money. It was noted that there was a need to engage with a greater number of tenants who had not been previously engaged in Area Housing Panels.
- RotherFed would remain principal first point of contact for tenant involvement.
- Approval for projects would be made through support from ward councillors and tenants through the Ward Housing Hubs, supported by Council officers
- Reiteration that projects would align with ward priorities and would need to meet HRA funding criteria.
- Clarity was sought about budgets and areas of spend. This would be project specific, but generally speaking funding for smaller scale projects could be accommodated within the Ward Housing budget, but larger scale projects would have to be funded through the Housing Capital Programme.
- Customer access still to be further developed through digital channels, however with recognition that there may need to be other channels available for people who may have difficulty with digital access. Most younger tenants have access to the internet through mobile phone contracts. Free access to wifi was available in local libraries and was also being rolled out in some of the Housing neighbourhood centres.
- Need to publicise the benefits of ward based working and successes. There was also a need to move swiftly on projects, with regular updates provided to ward members and groups on progress.
- Awareness raising would take place with officers to update them of new arrangements.
- Process for conflict resolution was discussed, particularly in two member wards. Any issues arising would be considered by the Cabinet Member for Housing, as portfolio holder and Head of Housing Operational Services, as senior officer for tenant involvement and associated budget.

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- Closer working with Parish/Town Councils was welcomed; however, clarification was sought about how this would be facilitated.

Overall, Members had indicated their broad support for the proposals that had been prepared for consideration by the Cabinet.

Resolved:-

1. That Cabinet be advised that the recommendations be supported.

101. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that there were no urgent items of business requiring the consideration of the Board at the meeting.

102. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The Chair confirmed that this was the final meeting of the calendar year and placed on record his thanks to Board Members, Cabinet Members and officers for their work in supporting the work of Overview and Scrutiny in Rotherham. Furthermore, he took the opportunity to wish Members and officers a very merry Christmas and conveyed his good wishes for the new year.

Resolved:-

That the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board be held on Wednesday 15 January 2020 at 11.00 a.m. at Rotherham Town Hall.