

**IMPROVING PLACES SELECT COMMISSION
Tuesday, 20th October, 2020**

Present:- Councillor Mallinder (in the Chair); Councillors Atkin, Birch, Buckley, B. Cutts, Elliot, Jacques, Jepson, Jones, Khan, McNeely, Reeder, Rushforth, Sansome, Sheppard, Taylor, Julie Turner, Tweed and Wyatt. Also present were RotherFed Co-optees Ms. Mary Jacques and Ms. Kay Bacon.

Apologies were received from Cllr Hoddinott, the Cabinet Member for Waste, Roads and Community Safety.

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

96. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 8 SEPTEMBER 2020

Resolved:-

That the minutes of the previous meeting held on 8 September 2020, be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

97. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

98. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

The Chair confirmed that no questions from members of the press or public had been submitted.

99. 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.

100. ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Consideration was given to a briefing and presentation regarding economic recovery plans at the national, regional, and local level. The presentation incorporated data visualisations illustrating the economic impact of COVID-19. The presentation further covered the key priorities for approximately the next 18 months.

The presentation illustrated the upward trend in benefits claimants; meanwhile, the number of job advertisements trends downward nationally. Several National Schemes to help alleviate the economic crisis were listed. It was noted that some businesses have fallen through the

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cracks as far as being eligible for available aid, which could be partially offset by the Council's Discretionary Business Grants. The Council has several active bids for funding from Central Government: £1 million requested from Town's Fund Accelerated Funding; £33.6 million allocated to Sheffield City Region from Getting Building Fund, and £40 million allocated to Sheffield City Region from Brownfield Housing Fund.

At a regional level, The Sheffield City Region Renewal Action Plan has requested £1.72 billion from central government to support investment in renewal of skills and expertise so that people can find and stay in work; in employers' ability to survive, adapt and thrive; and in job creation to reduce inequality.

In terms of local response, the Council has made Economic Recovery one of the five priority strands of the Year Ahead Plan. The Council has administered Government grants, which has included paying out over £44 million in grants to local businesses, through the Council's finance team—including over £2.5 million in discretionary grants to those who missed out on other recovery schemes. The local response also continues coordinating local intelligence and response, delivering major projects, reopening the town centre, developing the response to emerging funding opportunities and co-ordinating with Sheffield City Region to inform and develop the Renewal Action Plan. The presentation also identified transportation schemes which will bring jobs to the area.

In discussion, clarification was requested around variations in grant amounts. The response conveyed that larger businesses with larger running costs draw down larger grants. It was noted that all businesses were able to apply for these grants if they had experienced a loss of income because of the pandemic.

Regarding the various funding packages available, Members requested clarification of how the Towns Fund was allocated. Also, assurances were sought that Rotherham would receive its fair share of the money allocated to Sheffield City Region. In response, Officers summarised where the grants were as of the date of the meeting in their various stages of applications and bidding. Specifically, the Future High Street Fund has gone to the final bid stage and is expected to be announced next month. Some of the funding relies on the funding cycle and the City Region. Cabinet agreed we would be submitting to the cohort in January regarding the Towns Fund.

Further reassurance was also requested regarding businesses missed by relief schemes. Regarding the support available for benefits claimants and those who cannot claim, Officers cited the strand of the renewal action plan that supports people to overcome the barriers to getting back into work. It was noted that much of this action comes through the DWP.

Members requested more information about learning from the previous lockdown experiences and tracking how the Council has used

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discretionary funding, and how the Council might use this learning to help mitigate the adverse economic effects of the pandemic as it continues. Officers expressed hope that more funding will become available from Government and from SCR to support new initiatives as they are needed. In response, Members emphasised the need to capture and apply learning and criteria for funding allocations to help businesses survive the next phases of challenges brought by the pandemic.

Members requested assurances that damage to Town Centre caused by additional Tier 3 and lockdown restrictions would be mitigated, as well as interruption to businesses during construction. The response from Officers conveyed that footfall would likely be affected by additional restrictions, and whilst some businesses were harmed, others do even better. The Government would be putting support in place for businesses as the region goes into different levels of restrictions. Regarding the interference of road works, in the period around December, none of those works will be underway. Access to businesses will not be cut off, and businesses will be informed of all intended works.

Members also inquired further about efforts to support businesses in areas of the Borough other than the Town Centre. Members also requested a breakdown of how the support moneys are being distributed. The response from Officers clarified that there was no specific support scheme designated for Town Centre businesses. The work schemes in the Town Centre do have designated funds. The business support on offer was available to individual businesses through SCR.

An answer to a question about the status of the Maltby Grammar School site was offered later following consultation with the relevant officer.

Members asked for clarification around potential plans to change the road traffic pattern at a key route into and out of central Rotherham. Officers clarified that the two schemes were designed to mitigate traffic and air quality problems and congestion in that area, which is one of the key economic corridors into Rotherham. The Cabinet Member also noted that the three ward Councillors had been working with officers in the transport team on the transport schemes and what they entail throughout the development process.

Members requested assurances that the enhanced transport connectivity links would not push businesses closer to Parkgate than the Town Centre. The Cabinet Member provided assurances that the enhanced connectivity links meant that people could get into and around Rotherham easier and safer and still have clean air zones for the health and wellbeing of residents. The congestion in Parkgate prevents people from coming into the Town Centre, so these interventions would help to alleviate that. Officers further illustrated the benefits of a potential added station on the HS2 main line, which was currently being discussed.

Members requested further information regarding efforts at a specific housing sites at Brownfield. In response, the Cabinet member noted that work on this site was being overseen by the Housing Team.

Members requested additional reassurances that businesses would be supported if their own cash reserves became depleted or national funding ran out. Officers illustrated the possible ways for businesses to access support, including through the SCR Renewal Action Plan, Specialist Advice and a range of digital interventions and support. The capacity to support businesses would be largely determined by how much funding was provided by Government.

Resolved:-

1. That the briefing be noted.
2. That a clear plan be developed to aid Borough residents who were unable to qualify for previous aid schemes.
3. That an up-to-date list of available schemes and grants be circulated to Members.
4. That a briefing be provided as to the criteria and allocations for Council Discretionary Funds.
5. That authority be delegated to the Governance Adviser in consultation with the Chari to confirm the wording of these recommendations.

101. ENERGY SWITCHING SCHEME

Consideration was given to a report regarding the Council's proposed scheme to reduce the number of households in the Borough that pay high tariffs for gas and electricity. This was part of the Council's efforts to reduce fuel poverty. In 2019, the Council went out to tender to secure a partner to deliver the scheme, and Robin Hood Energy (RHE) was awarded the contract in September. In the end, however, the contract could not be agreed formally because RHE could not deliver the specifications. Insights garnered through this process informed subsequent amendments to the specifications, as the Council tried again to tender a partner to deliver the scheme. Cabinet gave permission in July.

Finding a partner to help deliver the scheme was noted as the best way to reach a high number of residents with cheaper tariffs. At the same time as going back out to the market, the team also prepared a secondary plan for delivering the scheme without a partner if a suitable one could not be found. This way, the team was able to ascertain what would be possible to provide internally as well as from external partners. Since July, the

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primary focus had been on the retendering exercise, and on a smart meter scheme to maximise benefits especially to residents over 65 years of age. At the time of the meeting, the team was currently still assessing whether any compliant bids had been received.

In discussion, Members sought clarification whether Options 1 and 2 would be counterintuitive. The response averred that the Community Energy Scheme includes supporting smart meter conversion for residents over 65, but this scheme, which runs out in the coming months, can feed directly into whichever scheme the Council ultimately implements.

Members also hoped to hear more about the kinds of actions that would make practical implementation of Option 2 work. The response from officers conveyed that if the scheme were so popular that it could not be managed by one person, a second person would be recruited. The scheme would be supported at that scale of demand as required.

Members also inquired about retention of customers if the scheme available is not the most inexpensive for the customers; therefore, some unique draw might be provided to help keep subscribers. In response, Officers noted that any customers who signed up would not be put on a standard variable rate but would have the advantage of being moved onto a best available tariff rate. Discounts were not possible because of volatility in the market.

Members requested further clarification around the amendments to the specifications and contract timing. Elements that no energy company would likely comply with had had to be discarded. One such specification that been discarded was that the provider be among the top 20 suppliers across the country. Some criteria like these were deleted, others added to make the contract more attractive to potential suppliers. Contract timing is multifaceted and therefore a length of contract could not be stipulated. The partner would likely change the contract length continually based on the variety of contracts offered. This stipulation would have therefore closed down the market considerably.

Further information was also requested regarding smart meters for residents over 65 whose properties may be incompatible with smart meters in general. The response suggested that sometimes incompatibilities had technical causes, and there were often technical solutions in kind. Part of the advantage of the scheme, the response further noted, was to dispel the myths associated with smart meters.

Members inquired as to the results of the initial equalities impact assessment associated with this scheme. Officers emphasised that the goal of the contract's equality impact is to make the service equal for everyone in Rotherham. There may be specific areas that need extra effort, and in the further in-depth assessment to come, the team will be working with the equalities team to continue to ensure that everyone's interests are equally represented in the scheme.

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Members asked to know more about why it would not be possible to ask the original contractor to apply for the contract. The reasons were that the company had helped to compose the specification and would therefore have unfair advantage, and because the company was currently being sold off by its owner, Nottingham Council.

Members asked for a rationale as to why it could not be stipulated that our tariff be lower than others. The response confirmed that the partner awarded the contract would have to agree not to have a tariff for Rotherham that is higher than their best tariff. It was affirmed that while this scheme would not yield the lowest tariff to be found anywhere in the country, the scheme was not aimed at users who are able to switch schemes themselves. It was aimed at those who are unable to switch on their own. The purpose behind designing our own delivery scheme was to provide a failsafe in case the market was not fruitful again.

Members requested reassurances that the Council would not be taking on any risk by implementing these schemes. Officers summarised the difficulties and challenges that had been encountered by various Councils that had chosen to become direct suppliers and had therein taken on risk, sometimes losing millions of pounds. This scheme positioned Rotherham Council in the role of broker, the go-between who facilitates getting the residents a better deal. It would not make a profit, it would cost the Council money, and it would be a service to the residents.

Members asked if any neighbouring authorities in the region have done something similar, and if the SCR has any input in the arrangements for these kinds of schemes. Officers described the situation of Sheffield, Doncaster, and Barnsley, Leeds, Bradford, and others. All of the neighbouring authorities' energy schemes are currently up in the air until the future of RHE becomes clear. It was clarified that the proposed contract is a concession contract, so, except for paying for officer time, all risk sits with the supplier and not the residents or the Council. All the customers are moved on to another supplier and do not lose out. Risk had been incurred by other authorities who had developed their own brand, which Rotherham did not propose to do. The reputational risk exists in the potential for the customer to have a problem with a provider, and even though the provider would not be the Council, it was possible that the customer could be dissatisfied.

Members asked about opportunities for green energy. Officers provided assurances that most all suppliers provided green energy tariffs, and the Council was exploring additional avenues for green energy.

Clarification was also requested around the responsibilities of the Community Energy Officer. The response described the duties of the officer, who had been recruited and in post since September of last year. This officer had been working on the community energy and energy efficiency work. Beyond this, the officer provided advice on energy

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efficiency and the voucher scheme. Some residents were adept at going online to manage their access, but some residents need more help, which the officer was available to provide. The officer would also provide workshops as needed in future. COVID had interrupted the marketing work that had been planned, but these efforts had shifted to digital contexts. The officer also worked with charity groups.

Members inquired as to the further benefits of the smart meter. The response described that residents could monitor how much energy they were using and what they were spending at any given time and at varying times of day. Studies had been carried out by government and the NEA that had shown that smart meters help save energy consumption.

Resolved:-

1. That the report be noted.
2. That a further update be presented in early 2021, that provides a plan for managing any potential risk to the authority, including reputational risk, posed by the new scheme.

102. BEREAVEMENT SERVICES BRIEFING [DEFERRED]

This item was deferred to September 2021, in consultation with the Chair.

103. WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

Consideration was given to an update in respect of progress against the agreed work programme. Recent recommendations have led to the formation of a sub-group of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board with examines call centre communications. It was also noted that a new sub-group had been formed at the request of the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board in respect of Building Use. It was further noted that recommendations from the Major Incident Plan Review Sub-group would be reported at the next meeting. Further, a call for membership was made regarding the upcoming Building Use, Flood Alleviation, and Homes Allocation sub-groups.

Resolved:-

1. That the updated work programme be approved.

104. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that there were no urgent items of business.

105. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

The Chair announced that the next virtual meeting would be held on 8 December 2020, at 1:30 pm.

