

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD**  
**Wednesday 15 November 2023**

Present:- Councillors Ball, Browne, Cooksey, Elliott, Tinsley, Wyatt and Yasseen.

Apologies for absence:- Apologies were received from Councillors Clark, Bacon, Baker-Rogers and Pitchley.

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

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

**60. NOMINATIONS TO CHAIR THE MEETING**

In the absence of both the Chair and Vice-Chair, Councillor Browne was nominated from the floor to chair the meeting.

**61. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 13 SEPTEMBER 2023 AND 11 OCTOBER 2023.**

**Resolved:** - That the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board held on 13 September 2023 and 11 October 2023 be approved as a true record.

**62. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**63. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS**

There were no questions from the press or public.

**64. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

There were no items on the agenda requiring the exclusion of the public or press.

**65. ANNUAL COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLAINTS REPORT 2022-23**

The Chair invited the Cabinet Member for Customer Services, Finance and Community Safety to introduce the report. The report gave an overview of compliments and complaints received in 2022-23 and provided a comparison with trends and performance over the previous five years. It was outlined that understanding complaints and compliments was important to the Council to help it learn about how it dealt with customers and where improvements could be made to ensure that services were delivered in a fair and equitable manner. The Cabinet Member welcomed feedback from OSMB on the content and format of the report.

The Assistant Chief Executive welcomed representatives from each of the directorates to address service specific questions. The Assistant Chief Executive gave a short presentation outlining the direction of travel for complaints over the past 5 years. It was noted that following feedback from the Board a greater emphasis has been placed on the themes emerging from complaints, actions taken and the impact that this has had on trends. It was noted that the Covid 19 pandemic had reduced the numbers received between 2020 - 2022. However, in 2022-23 the numbers returned to slightly above pre pandemic levels.

Most Directorates saw an increase in the numbers of complaints. 280 more complaints were received in 2022/23, which was an increase of 25%. 175 more complaints were upheld (proportionately this is a significant increase on the previous year with 32% of all complaints upheld compared to 24% last year).

More complaints were received that were categorised as Quality of Service (31% of all complaints this year and 13% last year) and complaints categorised as Action of Staff decreased significantly. More compliments were received although it was noted that not all compliments may be passed on to the Complaints Team by staff.

Performance has been maintained at 85% of complaint responses within target timescale. Whilst slightly below the 5-year average of 86%, this met the Council Plan target of 85%. There had been a continued effort made across all Council services to maintain performance to timescales, despite the increase in numbers received.

The Annual Review letter from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) was received on 19th July 2023, setting out their records of referred complaint investigations. In 2022/23 fewer complaints were investigated and upheld by the LGSCO than in the previous year, with 7 complaints investigated compared to 19. The decrease can be considered as a return to average numbers received following an unusually high number of enquiries investigated in the previous year (an effect of the Covid 19 pandemic). Overall, the Annual Review letter presented a positive view of the Council's handling of formal complaints in 2022/23. The number of investigations decreased significantly, but the upheld rate was slightly above average. There were no Public Interest Reports in this year.

It was noted that the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman had recently launched a consultation with the Housing Ombudsman on a Joint Complaints Handling Code. Subject to the outcome of the consultation and the final published Code, a self-assessment would be undertaken and as a result a revised policy developed for consideration.

The Chair invited questions from members of the Board and a discussion on the following issues ensued:

- How consistency in response to customer complaints was approached. It was outlined that there was a comprehensive programme of staff development to understand the customer experience.
- The efforts to capture trends, compliments and complaints and reflect the learning that had taken place was welcomed.
- Given the changes since the pandemic, whether a more appropriate baseline for measurement should be established.
- Engagement with local communities to build relationship and confidence.
- How complaints and the customer experience were captured in commissioned or contracted services (for example bereavement services). What was being done to measure performance and quality in those areas? It was outlined that repairs services were included in the Council's complaints processes. However, there were other contracted services for example leisure services and bereavement services who had responsibility for complaints through their contractual arrangements.
- It was recognised that for some people it was difficult to complain so it was important to deal with feedback sensitively and evidence that feedback had been acted upon.
- It was noted that the number of complaints was relatively small compared with the volume of interactions that took place across each of the directorates.
- It was outlined that there was a greater focus on resolving complaints as early as possible.
- Feedback from councillors and referral through surgery reports and how this intelligence could be used to improve customer service.
- If councillors could attend a staff development session with housing workers to demonstrate what training is offered. It was confirmed that this could be arranged.
- What was the financial cost to uphold complaints, conduct investigations and pay compensation? It was confirmed that these figures would be circulated to members.
- It was noted that there was a trend that the number of women complainants had risen, particularly in regards of Regeneration and Environment and Housing. It was noted that since equalities monitoring had been introduced there had been a greater number of female complainants compared with men. However, it was difficult to ascertain if there were any emerging trends.
- It was highlighted that good communications (for example about missed refuse collections) may mitigate future complaints. The Strategic Director for Regeneration and Environment outlined that the service would welcome intelligence to improve services and

improve the customer journey.

In summary, the Head of Democratic Services outlined comments in relation to staff training and factoring in lessons learnt from complaints.

The request for councillors to be invited to a staff development session in relation to council tenants was noted, as was the request for further details of the financial impact of complaints to be circulated.

Resolved:

1. That the Annual Compliments and Complaints Report for 2022/23 be noted.
2. That comments on areas that require further improvement regarding complaints handling and reporting be provided.

## **66. REVIEW AND UPDATE OF THE MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY**

The Chair invited the Cabinet Member for Finance, Customer Services and Community Safety to introduce a report and provide an update of the Council's Budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to 2025/26. The MTFS would be revised further in advance of the Council Budget setting meeting in February 2024, to take account of the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2024/25, when issued, along with budget policy proposals on levels of Council Tax and fees and charges and any budget savings or investments.

This position may be subject to variation should Government announce changes to the funding of local authorities or if inflation assumptions change significantly.

The MTFS review, alongside the latest Financial Monitoring 2023/24 report to Cabinet in November, envisaged a financial overspend of £4.2m for 2023/24 that would require the use of the Council's reserves to achieve a balanced financial outturn position for 2023/24.

The current MTFS forecasts identified that the Council was able to provide a balanced budget for 2024/25 but faced a significant financial challenge in setting a balanced budget for 2025/26. Therefore, it was expected that additional use of reserves will be required for 2023/24 and likely for 2025/26. This position was subject to review when the Finance Settlement for 2024/25 was received.

Nationally, the financial environment presented a very challenging position with a number of local authorities declaring S114 notices, stating that a balanced budget may not be achieved for those Councils issuing the notice. It was noted that in comparison Rotherham's

budget position was more robust.

The Chair invited the Strategic Director for Finance and Customer Services and the Assistant Director for Finance to give a brief presentation.

It was outlined that the report provided a technical update and was based on the MTFS as approved by Council in March 2023. It had been updated to reflect changing assumptions around inflation, pay and other pressures. It was noted that a similar update was provided to the Board at this stage last year which Members had found helpful.

It was noted that announcements made by Government on the 22 November 2023 or within the subsequent Finance Settlement for 2024/25 may add further financial pressures to the Council's MTFS position, either through Government not inflating public sector resources as assumed or through other cuts to public sector funding.

The presentation outlined saving proposals agreed for 2023-2024 and 2024-2025. It was noted that progress was being made on the delivery on the identified savings proposals for the current financial year.

Directorates were working on recovery plans to mitigate the financial overspend for 2023/24 to minimise the use of reserves. Within the current forecast overspend, the Directorates had a forecast overspend of £9.2m but reduced to £4.2 million because of budget contingencies. This was largely due to the following overall issues:

- Placement pressures within Children and Young People's Services and Adult Social Care.
- Home to School Transport pressures within Regeneration and Environment and Children and Young People's Services.
- Pressures relating to the longer-term recovery from Covid-19 on income generation within Regeneration and Environment.
- Inflationary costs impacting the cost of food in Schools Catering and contractual and provider inflation impacting Children and Young People's Services.
- Increased costs of homelessness due to increased demand.
- Increased property costs within Regeneration and Environment
- It was noted that recovery plans were in place to mitigate against these pressures wherever possible.

The Assistant Director gave an overview of known pressures, including Government funding streams. It was noted that whilst inflation remained a challenge, a number of major contracts had been forecast to be hit with higher inflation, as such this had created some surplus in the Council's MTFS. It was outlined that business rate

values were to be reassessed and it was anticipated that this would be positive for the Council. The Treasury Management Strategy continued to generate savings and additional income to support the budget pressures in the current financial year.

An outline of the budget setting timetable was given, with the budget and Council tax plans for 2024-25 being presented to Council on 28 February 2024.

The Chair invited comments from the Board and a discussion on the following issues ensued:

- Clarification was sought if the recent flooding events in the Rotherham area may have an impact on the budget. It was outlined that there would be some costs but this would not have a significant impact on the MTFS.
- The rise in the number of Section 114 notices was noted and the challenges faced by councils in meeting their obligations. The prudent measures undertaken by the Council was acknowledged, particularly in light of reductions in public spending and rise of cost-of-living pressures.
- Whether savings identified in previous years were achievable. In response the Strategic Director outlined mitigations put in place to achieve cost reductions balanced against increases in demand and placement costs. Other measures to bring down costs, such as promoting in-house fostering and children's homes, would address these pressures longer term. Details were provided on operational savings.
- Clarification was requested on the status of investments in other financial institutions and local authorities. It was outlined that this was accepted treasury management practice and oversight was provided by the Audit Committee, who received mid-year and outturn reports on the impact of decisions. It was further clarified that the Council's approach to investment and borrowing was set out in the Treasury Management Strategy which was also appended to the Council's budget and council tax report. It was noted that risks associated with treasury management were prudentially monitored. It was requested that a separate session be organised on treasury management, in addition to that provided to the Audit Committee.
- Clarification was sought on the status of the equality impact assessment. It was confirmed that this would be reviewed.

**Resolved:**

- 1) That Cabinet be advised that the recommendations be supported.
  1. That the MTFS update be noted.

2. That Cabinet note the potential requirement to use reserves in order to balance the Council's outturn position for 2023/24.
- 2) That Cabinet be requested to arrange an all Member Seminar on Council Finances including Treasury Management and Investments.

## 67. CRISIS SUPPORT 2024 - 2027

The Chair invited the Assistant Chief Executive to introduce the report.

It was outlined that crisis support services in Rotherham were currently delivered through a partnership agreement between the Council, FareShare, Voluntary Action Rotherham (VAR) and LASER Credit Union. The ongoing level of demand together with available supplies of food had led to the need to develop a more sustainable crisis support system, with the aim of supporting people to move from being in crisis towards independence and resilience.

To develop the new model, including the elements funded by the Council, a codesign process had been followed, engaging with a range of providers and referring organisations. A key element of the revised wider model was ensuring it is aligned with holistic and wider support services, which would work to ensure that fewer people experience crisis on a repeated basis. This would be supported through a new referral system to better co-ordinate information for front line staff, offering a broader range of food types that make up crisis food parcels, flexible to the requirements of different organisations and utilising a revised definition of crisis support to enable this.

It was noted that demand continued to increase and was higher than levels experienced pre-Covid pandemic.

Following approval of the recommendations within this report, bids would be invited from partner organisations to finalise the implementation details and to then deliver the model. This would be via service level agreements covering the years 2024/25 to 2026/27.

The Chair invited questions and comments from the Board and a discussion on the following issues ensued:

- It was noted that the Council had invested in infrastructure support for a number of years. Clarification was sought on how this was funded since the Discretionary Social Fund was abolished in 2012. It was noted that from 2015 the Council had used the General Fund to support local welfare provision, supplemented with time-limited Government funding introduced during the pandemic to support food provision. It was outlined that with increased demand, the continued use of the short-term Household Support Fund was not sustainable

and therefore, the proposals outlined presented a longer term model.

- Details were sought about the criteria for determining the levels of crisis loans. It was noted that this the provision of crisis loans could only be provided by a registered organisation (e.g. a credit union). Loans of up to £250 were available although in some circumstances, larger loans could be available. It was felt that the Council's model compared favourably with similar crisis loan provision in other local authorities.
- If consideration had been given to the provision of baby banks and community fridges in the plan. It was noted that a number of organisations that provided crisis food were also supporting other provision including clothing. It was noted that there was a list used by referral organisations to advise users of the different aspects of support available. It was outlined that there was a good geographic spread of provision across the borough.
- It was highlighted if the reorganisation of the household waste recycling centres could provide an opportunity to reuse clothes and equipment, for example school uniforms or baby equipment.

**Resolved:**

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

That Cabinet agree:

1. The future provision of crisis support and grant allocations of:
  - a. £60k for Crisis Loans.
  - b. £34k for infrastructure and transport to enable the supply of crisis food to foodbanks (Community Food Members).
  - c. £10k for supporting co-ordination of the Food in Crisis Partnership, collection and dissemination of data and provision of a referrals process.
2. That bids be invited from organisations to work in partnership with the Council, to finalise the implementation details and deliver the provision outlined at recommendation 1.
3. To delegate authority to the Assistant Chief Executive in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion to enter into a service level agreement with partner organisations to provide crisis support for the years 2024/25 to 2026/27.

**68. WORK PROGRAMME**

The Board considered its Work Programme. It was noted that an update report on OSMB activity and review progress would be provided to the next meeting of the Board.

**Resolved:** - That the Work Programme be approved.

**69. WORK IN PROGRESS - SELECT COMMISSIONS**

There were no updates provided.

**70. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS - 1 NOVEMBER 2023 - 31 JANUARY 2024**

The Board considered the Forward Plan of Key Decisions from 1 November 2023 to 31 January 2024.

**Resolved:** - That the Forward Plan be noted.

**71. CALL-IN ISSUES**

There were no call-in issues.

**72. URGENT BUSINESS**

There were no urgent items.

**73. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

**Resolved:** - That the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board will be held at 10am on Wednesday 15 December 2023 at Rotherham Town Hall.