

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD
Tuesday 16 January 2024

Present:- Councillor Clark (in the Chair); Councillors Bacon, Baker-Rogers, Ball, Browne, Cooksey, Elliott, Tinsley, Wyatt and Yasseen.

Apologies for absence:- Apologies were received from Councillors Pitchley.

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

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

87. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 13 DECEMBER 2023

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

88. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Wyatt raised a non-pecuniary personal interest as a holder of a Council tenancy in relation to item 7 – HRA Business Plan, Rent Setting and Service Charges 2024/25. He remained present for the discussion but did not vote.

89. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

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

90. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

There were no exempt items.

91. MID-YEAR REPORT ON COUNCIL PLAN AND YEAR AHEAD DELIVERY PLAN PROGRESS FOR 2023-2024

The Chair invited the Chief Executive to introduce the report. Also in attendance were the Leader of the Council, Assistant Chief Executive, Strategic Director for Adult Care, Housing and Public Health, Strategic Director for Children and Young People's Services, Strategic Director for Finance and Customer Services, and Strategic Director for Regeneration and Environment.

In January 2022, the Council adopted a Council Plan for 2022-25 and a Year Ahead Delivery Plan for the period up to 31 March 2023. The Council Plan was informed by public consultation and sets out the Council's vision for the Borough and priorities for serving residents and communities.

To enable the Council to work towards the Council Plan outcomes and achieve its commitments, a Year Ahead Delivery Plan was also developed, detailing the key activities to be delivered over the period from 1 January 2022 to 31 March 2023. The Year Ahead Delivery Plan was updated for this financial year and approved by Cabinet on 24th April 2023. Attached at Appendix 1 was the mid-year report for 2023-24, the first of the two planned reports.

The report focussed on the progress made on the activities in the Year Ahead Delivery Plan to date and the Council Plan performance measure data for Quarter 2 of the 2023-24 financial year. The report outlined the progress made against the 98 actions and milestones in the delivery plan. A high-level overview of achievements and challenges was outlined in the appendices to the report. It was noted that OSMB members had previously requested that achievements and challenges be captured in a single section of the report.

It was noted that 82% of activities were complete or on track, 18% of activities were delayed (which equated to 10 actions delayed by less than three months and eight actions that would not be completed within three month of the original target date).

The Chief Executive gave a brief summary of significant achievements in the last period. This included the successful delivery of the Rotherham show with an estimated audience of over 88,000 people; the re-opening of the Thurcroft library and neighbourhood hub; the completion of housing developments; the launch of an online resource for families to access support around emotional health and well-being; the start of initial construction work on the markets and library development; and the opening of two business incubation centres.

In terms of performance information, of 65 performance measures within the Council Plan, 45% on target (which equates to approximately 30 measures). Management action was taken to address performance issues.

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

- In respect of unmet targets, clarification was sought about how learning was applied to their revision. It was outlined that as part of management action, key themes were examined to review and identify areas of challenge. It was noted that the volatility in markets around construction costs had affected delivery of some projects. The Leader explained that targets were kept under review to ensure that they were realistic, with a balance of targets moving in the right direction and longer-term aspirations.
- It was noted that the Council had invested in neighbourhoods, towns and villages and that this had made a positive impact. Other work around reducing the numbers of children in need was

welcomed.

- Further details were sought on Rotherham's working age population and what data was applied to benchmark the number of people in work. Data was sourced from the Office of National Statistics and the annual population survey. However, it was noted that it was a relatively small sample which made the data volatile. The Leader committed to providing a response to clarify which data sets were used. The number of people with long-term sickness was highlighted as having a potential impact on the working age population.
- In respect of the active travel agenda, clarification was sought on whether the Sheffield Road cycleway had been completed. It was confirmed that the target referred to the scheme commencing rather than completed works.
- Clarification was sought about how air quality improvements and pollution issues would be monitored and how the modal shift required to reduce car use would be evaluated. It was noted that the Government had set objectives about what they wanted to see in terms of active travel measures and provided investment for implementation.
- Reference was made to the Swinton library development and the recent discovery of light weight concrete (RAAC) in the original building. It was noted that this would have an adverse effect on timescales for completion of the project, including demolition of the old facility. It was noted that the report reflected the position in September and work was underway to complete as soon as possible. It was asked that consideration be given to when the new facility would open safely and how this would be communicated to residents.
- Details were sought on the "Say Yes" campaign and how its impact would be measured. It was explained that attendance at sessions was measured (e.g. smoking cessation) and referrals to physical activity by GPs were monitored. Reports on the impact would be submitted to the Health and Well-being Board in due course.
- Reference was made to the decrease in numbers of children with a child protection plan. Clarification was sought if this was a natural fluctuation or whether there was a correlation with work being undertaken in the service to reduce numbers. It was confirmed that there had been a significant and sustained reduction which related to the work undertaken with families to provide support at a much earlier stage. Work was also undertaken with parents to reduce the length of time children spend on child protection plans.
- It was noted that there had been an increase of 3.23% in carbon dioxide emissions and the reduction target had been lowered from 18% to 10%. Clarification was sought about how the revised target would be met and what programs were in place which would result in a significant reduction in greenhouse emissions. It was outlined

that the annual climate change report would be submitted to Cabinet in February 2024 which would detail the various projects and initiatives to support the delivery of net zero. It was highlighted that fleet and buildings were the largest carbon contributors. It was noted that a significant number of electric vehicles were being procured and this would have an impact on future emissions.

- Clarification was sought on the influence the Council had in relation to those targets delivered in partnership with external bodies (e.g. South Yorkshire Police). It was outlined that in relation to antisocial behaviour, this was a joint responsibility between those bodies which formed the community safety partnership. It was noted that there was a focus on neighbourhood policing and a joint approach to tackle crime and disorder.
- Reference was made to 49% of residents perceiving antisocial behaviour as a problem and the actions taken to hold the Council and partners to account. In response, it was noted that there had been reductions to staffing and budgets over the previous decade which had had an impact on services, however, the Council had made a significant investment in CCTV across the borough. It was stated that the Council had a responsibility to report accurately people's perception around levels of crime and in turn, report agencies' responses to addressing concerns and issues.
- Clarification was sought when the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge – Progress Review report would be submitted for consideration. It was outlined that progress was being made on the review's recommendations. For example, a workshop was planned with the Chief Executives of the Rotherham Together Partnership to create more local jobs. Details of the publicity to promote the Multiply Programme would be circulated to members.
- Details were sought on whether the delayed measure would have an impact on other services or budgets. It was noted that the delivery of capital projects was challenging because of inflationary pressures, however mitigations were in place to try and address these concerns.

The Chair thanked the Leader and Senior Leadership Team for their contributions.

Resolved:

That Cabinet be advised that the recommendations be supported.

That Cabinet note:

- 1) The overall position in relation to the Year Ahead Delivery Plan activities.
- 2) The Quarter 2 2022-23 data for the Council Plan performance measures.
- 3) The performance reporting timetable for the remainder of the 2023-

2024 year.

92. HRA BUSINESS PLAN, RENT SETTING AND SERVICE CHARGES 2024-25

The Chair invited the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing and Neighbourhood Working to introduce the report. Also in attendance were the Strategic Director for Adult Care, Housing and Public Health, Assistant Director of Housing and Service Manager (Business and Commercial). It was a requirement that the Council sets out its investment priorities over the 30-year period in an annual report. The proposed 2024-25 business plan made funding provision of £126 million for new council homes. It also committed £856 million for investment in housing stock, alongside day-to-day housing management and repairs and maintenance costs.

The Deputy Leader referred to the HRA business plan and areas for prioritised investments. These included:

- Continued delivery of housing growth;
- Safety and quality of the housing stock, including damp and mould;
- Preparation for proactive consumer regulation from April 2024;
- Meeting statutory minimum energy performance standards in the housing stock by 2030;
- Refreshing the Council's stock condition data by 2026.

The draft report recommended an increase in housing rents, non-dwelling rents, district heating charges and other charges. It was recommended that the Council dwelling rents are increased by 7.7%. It was outlined that the rent standard was published by Government and was set at the consumer prices index (CPI) plus an additional 1%. The CPI was measured at the end of September at 6.7%. The 7.7% increase equated to an average weekly increase of £6.54. It was established that around 73% of Council households would have the increase covered in their benefit entitlement and would therefore not feel a direct impact of the proposed change. The report outlined recommended options and presented modelling on alternatives. It was also noted that properties that were let for the first time or relet to a new tenant would be aligned to a formula rent level. The report also outlined shared ownership rent; charges for garages and parking spaces; and charges for cooking gas and district heating unit charge. It was noted that the report recommended a decrease in this charge of 4.2%.

It was highlighted that delegation had been assigned to the Assistant Director of Housing (in consultation with the Assistant Director of Financial Services and Cabinet Member) to review and change pricing structure if there were further reductions in fuel prices.

The Assistant Director of Housing added that the operating environment was extremely challenging for social housing landlords, with 18% cost

inflation over the last two years and it was noted that new proactive consumer regulations would be applied in respect of building and fire safety and damp and mould. It was outlined that the waiting list for council housing was in the region of 6500 households and homelessness rates were the highest they have been for the Council. This was also reflected nationally. The business plan continued to prioritise housing growth with the objective to extend the benefits of secure, affordable homes to as many residents as possible whilst ensuring that there was sufficient funding available to keep properties in a good standard.

It was noted that the Council had successfully sustained tenancies and support was available to tenants who may struggle due to cost-of-living pressures.

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

- The growth in numbers of Council housing was welcomed. The numbers of households on the waiting list were referenced, however it was also noted that the existing stock may not meet the needs or requirements of families (for example, a surplus of older one bed roomed bungalows). It was felt that historic stock should be reviewed to ensure that it met projected need.
- Clarification was sought on the modelling applied to inflationary increases and if this was subject to an ongoing review. It was reiterated that the inflationary assumptions were based on the consumer price index as prescribed by the Government.
- It was noted that there had been a continued reduction in arrears balances across all tenants. This was partly because of the work undertaken around financial inclusion and supporting tenants to improve their financial position so they can sustain their tenancy and prioritise rent payment.
- It was clarified that temporary accommodation and homelessness in general was not accounted for in the Housing Revenue Account as this was a general fund function. This would be addressed in the budget documents that would be considered in the following month. As the size Council's stock increased, more lettings would be created and because of the way the allocations policy worked, some people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness would be prioritised for those new lettings.
- It was reiterated that over 70% of tenants received housing benefit or universal credit which covered in full or in part their housing rent costs. An analysis of the affordability of the increase on households was detailed in the report.
- It was noted that the equality impact assessment was based on 2019 figures and required amendment.
- Clarification was sought whether the rent and charges could be

amended should inflation decrease further. In response, it was outlined that the service was still having to catch up with historic high inflation, when rents were at a lower rate.

- Further details were sought on the temporary delegation to reduce district heating charges. It was highlighted that it was felt appropriate to put this temporary measure in place because of market volatility. This enabled lower charges to be introduced more quickly should energy prices decrease. Assurance was given that when stability returned to energy market, the delegation would be removed and returned to Council for decision.
- Clarification was sought on how district heating costs were calculated, with the suggestion that this be referred to Improving Places Select Commission for its consideration.
- It was clarified that information and advice about available support was published on the Council website, in communications distributed to Council tenants (newsletters etc) and in the local newspaper.
- Further details would be provided about the Warm Home Discount and eligibility of tenants who may not have a current EPC (energy performance certificate).

Resolved:

1. That the matter of district heating costs be referred to Improving Places Select Commission for inclusion on its 2024-25 work programme.
2. That Cabinet be advised that the recommendations be supported:
That Cabinet recommends to Council to: -
 - 1) Approve the proposed 2024-25 Base Case Option C for the HRA Business Plan.
 - 2) Note that the Business Plan will be reviewed annually to provide an updated financial position.
 - 3) Agree that Council dwelling rents are increased by 7.7% in 2024/25 (Option 3).
 - 4) Agree that the Council should retain the policy of realigning rents on properties at below formula rent to the formula rent level when the property is re-let to a new tenant.
 - 5) Agree that shared ownership rents are increased by 9.4% in 2024/25.
 - 6) Agree that charges for garages and parking spaces, communal facilities, cooking gas and use of laundry facilities are increased by 6% in 2024/25.
 - 7) Agree that the District Heating unit charge per Kwh is set at 15.27 pence per kwh, a decrease of 4.2% (0.67 pence per

khw).

- 8) Agrees that the decision to reduce the price of District Heating Charges further during 2024-25 be delegated to the Assistant Director of Housing in conjunction with the Assistant Director of Financial Services following consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing. The delegation would only be used to respond to a change in Government policy or a significant change in the Ofgem price cap that has the effect of necessitating a lower unit price.
- 9) Approve the draft Housing Revenue Account budget for 2024/25 as shown in Appendix 6.

93. WORK PROGRAMME

The Senior Governance Advisor outlined the work programme for February and March 2024.

Resolved: - That the Work Programme be approved.

94. WORK IN PROGRESS - SELECT COMMISSIONS

The Chair deferred this item to the next meeting.

95. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS 1 JANUARY 2024 TO 31 MARCH 2024

The Chair requested that members submit suggestions for future items for pre-decision scrutiny.

Resolved:

That the Forward Plan of Key Decisions be noted.

96. CALL-IN ISSUES

There were no call-in issues.

97. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no urgent items.

98. 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 7 February 2024 at Rotherham Town Hall.