

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD
Wednesday 10 December 2025

Present:- Councillor Steele (in the Chair); Councillors Bacon, Allen, Baggaley, Blackham, Brent, A. Carter, Harper, Keenan, Monk and Tinsley.

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

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

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

67. MINUTES OF MEETING WEDNESDAY 12 NOVEMBER 2025 OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD

Resolved: That the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board held on 12 November 2025 be approved as a true record.

68. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

69. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

No questions were received.

70. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

There were no reasons to exclude the press or public.

71. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) PLAN, RENT SETTING AND SERVICE CHARGES 2026-27

At the Chair's invitation the Cabinet Member for Housing introduced the report highlighting the starting premise was that everyone deserved a safe, warm home, and the aim was to be the best social housing provider.

The HRA was ring-fenced and self-funding, with no reliance on council tax. It covered all housing-related costs, including repairs, maintenance, property upgrades (e.g., kitchens, bathrooms, roofs), new builds, acquisitions, and housing and neighbourhood support services.

Historically, rents were kept as low as possible, but the service faced increasing challenges and regulatory requirements, alongside ambitions to maintain high standards. Recent and upcoming changes included Awaab's Law (damp and mould management), stock condition surveys (for compliance and quality assurance), and minimum energy efficiency ratings (C), which would be costly. Future changes under the Decent Homes Standard were anticipated but unclear.

The team planned to present proposals on rent, rent convergence, garage rents, and fees. The Chair then handed over to the housing team for the presentation.

The Assistant Director of Housing and the Head of Housing Income and Support Services ran through the presentation. Before presenting proposals, additional background was provided on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). As noted, the HRA was a self-financing, ring-fenced account funded by rents, used for repairs, maintenance, and investment in housing stock. The HRA business plan was reviewed annually to ensure 30-year viability, which had become increasingly difficult due to significant pressures.

Risks were highlighted: both locally and nationally, the HRA had been under pressure for several years. Key factors included increased regulatory requirements, such as the Social Housing Regulation Act, fire safety changes, and Awaab's Law which were not anticipated when self-financing was introduced in 2012. Self-financing meant no government subsidy; income was limited to rent collected. This created challenges in balancing investment in existing stock (a priority) against new stock. Economic pressures, including inflation and rent increases not keeping pace with costs, further compounding the situation.

Further background was provided on pressures facing the HRA. While compliance with legal and regulatory requirements was clear, upcoming government announcements were expected to add further pressure. Consultation on changes to the Decent Homes Standard was ongoing; costs would remain unclear until details were confirmed.

Locally, investment continued in both existing stock and new builds, supported by borrowing. Internal challenges included securing a new repairs and maintenance contract, expected to cost more, and the completion of stock condition surveys on all 19,000 properties to enable a shift from responsive to planned repairs.

Nationally, Rotherham participated in lobbying for greater HRA support and flexibility. Government responses included a longer-term rent settlement, changes to Right to Buy eligibility, and funding announcements, £39 million nationally for new homes over 10 years, with £700 million allocated to the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority area. However, clarity was still awaited on self-financing, energy efficiency, low-carbon requirements, and Decent Homes 2 standards.

Significant risks and costs were highlighted for the HRA due to the upcoming regulations. Funding these pressures would rely solely on rental income, as the HRA was self-financing. The Government's proposals on rent convergence remained under consultation, with decisions deferred from November to January 2026. Many of the Council's proposals were based on the assumption that rent convergence

would proceed.

Rent convergence aimed to ensure tenants in similar properties paid the same rent. Currently, long-standing tenants often paid less than new tenants, who were charged at the government-set formula rent. Government proposals allowed for additional increases of either £1 or £2 per week (excluding inflation), meaning convergence would take eight years at £1 per week or four years at £2 per week to take full effect. Around 3,000 tenants already paid formula rent.

A comparison of proposed rents (including a 4.8% increase plus £2 convergence) against private sector rents showed social rents remained significantly lower across all property sizes.

The options for rent increases were outlined. The first option, CPI + 1%, aligned with the government's social rent formula and would generate approximately £4.1 million additional income for the HRA. This could fund, for example, 780 kitchen replacements, 1,400 bathrooms, 21 home acquisitions, or 12 new builds.

The second option, CPI + 1% plus £1 per week convergence, would generate around £4.9 million, while the third option, CPI + 1% plus £2 per week convergence, would generate approximately £5.6 million. A summary table in the report compared potential outcomes for each option.

Rent convergence would also support the continuation of the housing growth programme, enabling an extension of the current 1,000-homes build by an additional 500 units through to 2037–38. Factoring in Right to Buy restrictions, this would result in a net increase of around 300 homes.

The impact of the proposals on tenants was considered. Of 19,500 tenancies, approximately 15,000 received housing benefit or universal credit, meaning rent increases would be covered in full or part. Around 4,500 tenancies without benefits would be directly affected, though analysis indicated minimal financial impact in most cases, even with the highest increase. Recent changes to child benefit caps were expected to improve affordability further. Around 15% of tenants already paid formula rent due to existing policy.

Support packages were highlighted, including tenancy support services offering wraparound assistance for tenants at risk of losing their homes due to financial or other crises. Additional tenant support services were outlined. These included the Money and Benefit Advice Service, assisting thousands annually to access entitled benefits; a Benefit Advisory Service via Age UK for pension-age tenants; and support for Discretionary Housing Payments through the Revenues and Benefits Service.

For working tenants, the Employment Support Programme provided help with job access, training, and coaching to improve financial stability. The RMBC Household Support Fund offered assistance such as free school meals during holidays and an Energy Crisis Support Fund, granting £250

to residents with less than £150 disposable income per month.

Rent increase impacts were summarised: at £2 per week convergence, the average rent would rise to £101.07 per week, with differences between options ranging from £4.56 to £6.70. Modelling showed that adopting CPI + 1% plus £2 convergence would generate approximately £83 million additional income over the life of the business plan.

Significant upfront regulatory costs over the next four to five years, coinciding with completion of the 1,000 Homes Growth Programme, would create early cash flow pressures. The proposal was to borrow in the initial years to fund compliance with Awaab's Law, minimum energy efficiency standards, Decent Homes requirements, and improvements identified through stock condition surveys. Borrowing costs and minimum reserve balances were detailed in the report, with repayment planned in later years when cash flow improved.

The financial implications of rent options were summarised. Minimum reserve positions ranged from 11 years under CPI + 1% to two years under CPI + 1% plus £2 convergence. The plan proposed further investment of £213 million in housing growth, delivering 860 additional units, 360 to complete the 1,000 Homes Programme and 500 new homes by 2037-38. Significant upfront investment was also planned for existing stock to ensure homes were safe and warm, increasing average investment per unit from £45,000 to £60,000 over the 30-year plan.

Additional commitments included increasing energy efficiency investment by £24 million (to meet standards by 2030) and a 10% increase in garage rents, generating £90–95k annually to fund garage site improvements. Proposals also included:

- Rent increase of 4.8% plus £2 convergence, subject to government confirmation in January; if not approved, increase would revert to CPI + 1%.
- Affordable rents to increase by 4.8%, with revaluation at re-let for compliance.
- Shared ownership rents to increase by 5%.
- Garage rents to increase by 10%.
- Furnished home charges frozen; other fees and charges up by 3%.
- District heating unit rate maintained at 13.09p/kWh, keeping bills £60–£70 below forecast gas price cap.

Budget proposals included £37.7m for supervision and management (up £2.5m), with allocations for service delivery transition, repairs model review, and interim changes. Repairs and maintenance revenue was set at £30.5m, an increase of £2.9m over three years, to meet demand and address repairs identified through stock condition surveys and regulatory requirements.

Further financial details were provided. An additional £2.9m per year was allocated to cover rising costs and regulatory requirements, retained from

2029-30 onwards to offset anticipated increases when the repairs contract was renewed in 2030. A further £1.2m was added for planned repairs and £200k for estate caretaking to meet service demand.

On the capital side, the housing delivery programme budget was increased by £230m, continuing new home development through to 2037-38. Repairs and maintenance capital investment was significantly increased, raising average investment per unit from £45,000 to £60,000 over 30 years, totalling approximately £1.3bn. Energy efficiency investment was increased to £41m to achieve EPC Band C by 2030. A further £13.2m was allocated to improve district heating system networks from 2028–29 onwards, aiming to enhance efficiency and reduce tenant bills.

The Chair invited members of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board (OSMB) to raise questions and queries.

Councillor A Carter asked for clarification on the £1.2 billion investment in existing housing stock referenced in the presentation. He queried whether this related to Awaab's Law and energy efficiency requirements and requested details on the anticipated overall costs for Awaab's Law compliance and energy rating improvements.

In response, officers confirmed that Awaab's Law would initially result in increased revenue spend, with £2.9m per year added to the repairs and maintenance budget to part-fund these costs. For energy performance improvements, £41m was included in the plan to enhance thermal comfort and make auxiliary upgrades such as LED lighting. The larger £1.2bn investment related to stock condition survey outcomes, ensuring significant upgrades which included aspects such as kitchens, bathrooms, re-roofing, re-pointing, and new heating systems. This increase aimed to raise the average investment per unit from £45,000 to £60,000 over the 30-year plan, delivering safe, warm, and secure homes.

In a Supplementary Question, Councillor A Carter asked if the £2.9m allocation was specifically to part-fund legal changes under Awaab's Law and whether this implied that properties did not currently meet damp prevention criteria.

The Head of Housing Income and Support Services confirmed that the £2.9m was to enable the service to meet new regulatory standards under Awaab's Law, which required hazards such as damp and mould to be addressed within strict timelines, sometimes within 24 hours. This significantly increased service and contractor costs to mobilise immediate repairs. Historically, such issues could be addressed within 28 days; now urgent cases must be resolved within one day.

In response to a question from the Chair, the Head of Housing Income and Support Services reiterated that severe damp or mould cases now required action within 24 hours, compared to previous 28-day timescales,

driving higher costs. The Cabinet Member for Housing added that the service would triage cases using photographs submitted by tenants, with response times depending on severity. The stock condition surveys were ongoing, and while initial results on issues of damp and mould findings were positive, only a small proportion of surveys had been completed, so assumptions were limited. The £2.8 - £2.9m allocation was based on current estimates but could vary depending on survey findings. It was clarified that costs included not only treatment (e.g., spraying walls) but also preventative measures such as installing ventilation and bathroom fans.

Councillor Blackham referred to Appendix 3 on HRA reserve levels and queried how the figures had been calculated. He noted that while the graph showed a logical correlation between rent increases and reserve levels, the paper did not explain the methodology. He stressed that, given the major capital programme and borrowing requirements, the integrity of reserve level calculations was fundamental to the business plan through 2030 and beyond and requested clarification on the calculation process.

The Head of Housing Income and Support Services explained that under HRA regulations there was no prescribed minimum reserve level. The Council was moving to a risk-based reserve approach, identifying potential risks to ensure sufficient funding at property level. Current reserve levels shown in the plan increased significantly toward the end of the period, but these were not expected to remain at that level once additional regulatory costs, such as Decent Homes 2 and minimum energy efficiency standards, were confirmed. Reserves would likely reduce when the plan was refreshed next year, once the full scope of required work was understood.

In his supplementary question Councillor Blackham requested that the calculations used to determine the reserve levels shown in Appendix 3 be shared at a later date, noting the importance of understanding the methodology given the major capital programme and borrowing requirements. It was confirmed that this information could be shared after the meeting.

Councillor Brent asked for clarification on whether the proposals included both a one-year rent increase and longer-term projections for rent convergence and formula funding over four years.

The Head of Housing Income and Support Services confirmed that the funding projection related to rent convergence, which could run for up to 10 years under government proposals. Final details would depend on the government announcement expected in January 2026.

It was noted that rent increases would be reviewed again next year. The model for Mrs. Smith's house and Mrs. Jones's property showed a figure of 108. The inflationary impact on rent increases was acknowledged, and the four-year convergence projection was questioned in light of inflation.

In response, inflation was confirmed as being built into the plan. Convergence was noted as being separate from inflation. It was explained that rents would still increase annually by CPI plus 1%, if agreed by the council. The £8 difference between £100 and £108 would only reduce gradually by adding £1–£2 per week, as both rents increased at the same inflation rate. It was confirmed that inflation would affect the four-year convergence rate. The £2 adjustment was intended to apply for four years to support convergence, while rents would also rise annually by CPI plus 1%, subject to council decision. The inflation level would vary each year based on CPI.

Councillor Harper noted that discussions often focused on the 76% of tenants who did not pay all their rent, while the 24% who paid in full were sometimes overlooked. A request was made for a profile of this 24% to understand how close they were to requiring support. Concern was raised that tenants on affordable rent who had not yet moved to formula rent faced an increase of around £30 per month, which could push more tenants into arrears next year.

It was acknowledged that, unlike national government, the council did not have access to HMRC data for impact assessments. Affordability checks were confirmed as being carried out at tenancy sign-up, but ongoing income changes were not monitored, and tenants typically came to attention only when claiming benefits. It was reported that 3,000 tenants were already on formula rent, representing about 15%, and clarification was sought on what proportion of these paid in full. It was also noted that rent cards did not indicate whether tenants were on formula or affordable rent. The proposal had already been publicised on the BBC website and in the Advertiser, meaning residents were likely aware of potential changes. It was highlighted that £2 of the proposed adjustment depended on national government policy. A request was made for data on the 24% who paid in full, specifically how close they were to needing benefits as a result of the £30 monthly increase.

In response it was reported that of the 3,000 tenants paying formula rent, around 640 paid the full amount themselves. An affordability overview based on different household circumstances had been included in the report appendices, with further analysis to be provided after the meeting showing average rent increases by ward and property type to illustrate the impact of convergence. Appendix 5 contained the relevant details. It was noted that a clear communications plan was essential to ensure residents understood their rent type and whether convergence applied. Once tenants reached convergence, they would only pay the additional £1 or £2 until alignment was achieved, and this could be reviewed again next year. It was highlighted that delaying convergence would widen the gap and affect the sustainability of the HRA, as rental income would be lost each year. Previous rent reductions of 1% over four years and capped inflation increases had left the business plan behind target, and these shortfalls had not been recovered. The long-term impact of decisions on the HRA was emphasised.

The Cabinet member for Housing responded to Councillor Harper's point regarding income data, confirming that the Council had no way of knowing tenants' earnings if they were not on benefits, as it did not have access to salary records.

Councillor Harper queried the year the council began automatically moving tenants to formula rent and whether tenants could determine this based on their tenancy start date. The Head of Housing Income and Support Services confirmed they would provide clarification after the meeting on when the transition to rent convergence began.

Councillor Monk noted that the HRA faced significant demands, making it difficult to determine the highest priority at present. It was questioned how priorities would be managed between acquiring new homes, meeting the Decent Homes Standard, and improving energy efficiency if costs continued to rise, as had been seen over the past five years, particularly in building and maintenance. The Head of Housing Income and Support Services noted that regulatory requirements would take priority. The team confirmed that stress testing was carried out on the approved business plan to identify the inflation point at which it would fail. From this, contingency actions were developed to restore balance and ensure delivery of all mandatory requirements. Existing stock remained a priority, and proposals under Decent Homes 2 were expected to incorporate minimum energy efficiency standards. Once these requirements were clarified, the programme could be planned to move from individual damp and mould repairs to capital investment works that would bring properties up to standard.

A question was raised, by Councillor Keenan, about the robustness of support packages, particularly RMBC Money and Benefits services. It was asked whether support was provided beyond online channels, such as through roadshows or in libraries, to ensure accessibility for disadvantaged and working households. Clarification was sought on whether physical staff were available at locations such as GP surgeries, dentists, and colleges to assist young people with applications and provide advice.

In response it was reported that the wider financial inclusion team, including tenancy support and money and benefits advice, provided home visits where necessary and continued support until families or individuals were stable or referred to other agencies for issues such as addiction or mental health. The wider service offer was primarily online, but a telephone call-back and home visit option were available for those unable to access services digitally. Previous community drop-in sessions in libraries and centres had low uptake despite extensive promotion, but the council was willing to trial similar services again. It was emphasised that the aim was early intervention rather than crisis response, using data analytics to predict arrears and proactively offer support.

Clarification was sought by Councillor Blackham on Appendix 9 regarding whether the right-hand column showing surplus or deficit carried forward was being treated as a reserve. It was confirmed that while this was not technically a balance sheet reserve, it could become one. A question was raised about whether the calculation accounted for recent issues where new social housing had been written down in balance sheet value because it was classified as social housing.

It was confirmed that the capital asset value was discounted due to being social housing. Councillor Blackham noted that the surplus shown was not a true balance sheet reserve but a potential income surplus, and highlighted that the plan did not show the full balance sheet position, including assets, liabilities, and potential write-offs, to indicate a long-term reserve. The Head of Housing Income and Support Services acknowledged this and stated that work was underway with corporate finance colleagues to establish a risk-based reserve position during the financial year. They offered to seek confirmation from the treasury management team on the calculation after the meeting.

A question was raised by Councillor Monk about stock condition surveys and whether there was overlap between repairs identified through surveys and those reported by tenants. Clarification was sought on whether surveys focused solely on large capital projects, and whether any overlap could be used to optimise contractor activity by encouraging early resident reporting.

It was confirmed that there was an opportunity to raise awareness through stock condition survey letters, reminding tenants to report existing repairs when appointments were booked. The importance of prompt reporting was emphasised to prevent issues from worsening and to avoid higher costs, as well as ensuring tenants did not live in damp or cold homes. It was noted that any hazards identified during surveys were addressed immediately rather than scheduled, with Category 2 hazards assessed under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System. Surveys also included EPC assessments, enabling data-driven investment planning. This approach would allow for more efficient capital programmes rather than isolated repairs.

A question was raised by Councillor Bacon about the use of the Retail Price Index in calculating shared ownership rent and why a different formula applied. Clarification was sought on whether there were plans to phase out this approach by the end of the decade, as the report did not explain the rationale. It was confirmed that shared ownership rents were dictated by grant conditions. The Head of Housing Income and Support Services stated they would confirm after the meeting whether plans existed to phase out the use of RPI by the end of the decade. Councillor Bacon noted that RPI traditionally produced higher figures and referenced a previous paper suggesting its removal due to being outdated. The Head of Housing Income and Support Services agreed to provide a response following the meeting.

In response to a question from Councillor Tinsley about whether rental convergence for tenants in receipt of housing benefit was covered through government funding, it was confirmed that it was.

Councillor Harper noted that the report contained issues likely to affect a particular estate represented by the speaker. Decent Homes 2 was identified as a current risk with associated costs being factored in. Concerns were raised about Heat Network Regulations and billing performance: tenants previously assured that council billing would improve over Land 10's system reported delays (e.g., missing October bills followed by three bills issued in December), which was recognised as challenging for families in the current climate. Reference was made to "hard-to-heat" homes under Decent Homes 2, where costs could exceed £10,000 due to poor insulation and fixed-ceiling construction; clarification was requested on whether some properties might exceed £10,000 and what would happen to those that did in meeting EPC C.

It was reported that heat network studies were underway on district heating systems to inform future investment programmes. Significant energy efficiency issues were noted in some properties, and the council aimed to maximise use of available grant funding, such as Warmer Homes and social housing grants, alongside HRA resources. Clarity was still awaited on minimum energy efficiency standards and their link to Decent Homes requirements. It was stressed that the council would not exclude homes requiring over £10,000 of work, as this was not considered an appropriate response. Programmes for the Fitzwilliam estate, including new windows, were mentioned, and completion of heat network studies was identified as essential to determine solutions aligned with energy efficiency standards and decency works.

The Chair moved to a vote for those in favour of supporting the recommendations within the report. Two members of the Board voted against this proposal with ten members voting in favour, therefore the proposed recommendations were supported.

Resolved: That the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board supported the recommendations that Cabinet recommends to Council to:

1. Approve the proposed 2026/27 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 4.8% and, dependent upon the Government announcement in January 2026, implement a policy of rent convergence. Allowing rents for social housing properties that are currently below the Government-calculated formula rent to increase by an additional £2 per week in 2026/27. If convergence is capped below £2 that will be the level applied.
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 affordable rents are calculated at relet, based on an individual property valuation.
 6. Agree that affordable rents are increased by 4.8% in 2026/27.
 7. Agree that shared ownership rents are increased by 5% in 2026/27.
 8. Agree that charges for communal facilities, parking spaces, cooking gas and use of laundry facilities are increased by 3% in 2026/27.
 9. Agree that charges for garages are increased by 10% in 2026/27.
 10. Agree that the District Heating unit charge per kWh remains at 13.09 pence per kWh.
 11. Agree that the decision to reduce the price of District Heating Charges during 2026/27 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 a lower unit price.
 12. Approve the draft Housing Revenue Account budget for 2026/27 as shown in Appendix 8.

Further actions that arose from discussions were that:

- Confirmation of the year in which the Council began applying rent convergence for re-let properties will be provided.
- The Treasury Management Team will provide OSMB members with detailed information on the methodology used to calculate the HRA risk-based reserve.

72. LIBRARY STRATEGY

At the Chairman's invitation Councillor Marshall, the Cabinet Member for Street Scene and Green Spaces introduced the report noting it reviewed progress against the 2021-2026 Library Strategy and outlined proposals for next steps.

Over the past five years, libraries had evolved into neighbourhood hubs offering books, digital services, cultural activities, and health and wellbeing support. They also hosted job clubs, health sessions, and community events.

The report highlighted the achievements, areas for improvement, and sought approval to consult on a new 2027-2032 strategy to keep libraries inclusive, modern, and sustainable. Most objectives from the 2021-2026 strategy were delivered, including cultural hubs, digital inclusion, and health initiatives.

It was noted that reading for pleasure among young people had increased by 156%. Investments included a £1.5m refurbishment, £540k IT upgrade, and a new town centre library scheduled for autumn 2026. Customer

satisfaction remained above 95%.

Borrowing was below target, along with declining volunteer hours post-pandemic, and limited engagement with underrepresented groups (men, young people, lower-income residents).

The Cabinet Member for Street Scene and Green Spaces noted the next steps: public consultation (Feb-July 2026), analysis and draft development (Aug-Oct 2026), draft strategy to Cabinet (Nov 2026), final strategy to Cabinet (Mar 2027), then Full Council adoption. The committee were asked to note performance, approve consultation, and agree to receive the draft strategy post-consultation.

Polly Hamilton, Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism noted the key focus of the strategy was on addressing identified performance issues, some of which were expected to improve immediately due to the new central library development in Rotherham town centre and the redevelopment of Wath library in the north of the borough.

The Chair invited members of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board (OSMB) to raise questions and queries on the points raised.

Councillor Keenan noted her strong support for libraries and their importance to communities. She highlighted their personal significance and acknowledged learning new information from the report. Councillor Keenan sought clarification on the booklink service, how it operated, whether it was bookable, and how it could be promoted to reach vulnerable and harder-to-access communities. Councillor Keenan was also interested in understanding whether there were plans to expand community group use of libraries, similar to the Ukrainian group mentioned in the report. The response confirmed that Booklink was a targeted service supporting vulnerable groups and was highly valued. Further information was offered for members. It was noted that work with the Ukrainian community formed part of wider engagement with communities, particularly those for whom English was a second language. Opportunities were identified to expand this work through the new central library, celebrating cultural links and encouraging greater use of library resources and the wider town centre offer.

Councillor Brent asked whether borrowing figures included online borrowing. It was confirmed that they did, while visitor numbers only counted physical visits. Councillor Brent then noted his extensive use of online libraries and highlighted the benefits of services such as PressReader for accessing newspapers and magazines. He suggested greater promotion of online borrowing and proposed that libraries provide support or training to help residents access these services. In response the Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism thanked Councillor Brent for his testimony and noted that it would inform the upcoming marketing campaign linked to the library strategy renewal and consultation programme. A growth plan was

being developed to reverse declining visitor numbers and address lack of awareness about modern library services. It was suggested that local voices feature in the campaign, and Councillor Brent was invited, along with other members, to act as ambassadors for the library service.

A question was raised by Councillor Blackham, on how the consultation would reach non-regular library users and those outside community groups, representing the majority of the population. They asked how the process would capture views from these groups on what they want - or do not want - from the service. The Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism emphasised the importance of engaging non-users, noting that a one-size-fits-all approach would not work. Plans included working with partners and directly with communities, attending high-footfall locations and local events, and using digital engagement and social media to reach younger audiences. Targeted marketing would focus on underrepresented groups such as young people (11-25), men, and global majority communities, addressing barriers such as language and literacy. Cultural events and partnerships with schools, health services, faith groups, and voluntary organisations were highlighted as key methods to encourage participation.

Councillor Blackham noted that his ward had no local library and asked how consultation would reach older residents in outlying areas (e.g., Anston). Working with parish councils, was suggested, citing Anston Parish Council's refurbishment of the former library, and exploring outreach options to remote communities, including mobile library-style provision. The Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism welcomed the suggestion and confirmed that strong links with neighbourhood services and coordinators had already increased library usage. It was agreed that continuing to use these council connections was critical, and parish councils were recognised as an excellent partner for future engagement.

The Cabinet Member for Street Scene and Green Spaces reminded Members of their role in supporting consultation. They were encouraged to identify areas in their wards for outreach and invite officers to attend neighbourhood coordinator meetings, as members knew their communities best.

Councillor Monk's question was regarding volunteers, and it was quite disappointing to see that those numbers falling, noting she worked for a charity, starting as a volunteer there, and she really valued not only what volunteers could give, but what the organisations that took on volunteers could offer to people. Councillor Monk asked how opportunities for children to volunteer, such as those linked to the Children's Promise and Duke of Edinburgh Award, were communicated. The previous difficulties in finding placements for under-16s due to insurance and safeguarding concerns and suggested libraries could provide suitable opportunities were noted.

The Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism noted that most

volunteering opportunities for schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award were arranged through schools, which helped advocate and signpost on behalf of the library service. It was acknowledged that this was an issue and would be reviewed.

Councillor Harper asked what data determined library opening days and hours, noting variations between sites (e.g., Maltby open seven days, others only four) and queried practices such as lunchtime closures and unstaffed but technically open libraries (e.g., Mowbray Gardens on Wednesdays). The Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism explained that opening hours were determined by historical arrangements, previous public consultation, staffing capacity, and budget. Public input from users and non-users informed priorities. Technology such as OpenPlus was piloted at Mowbray Gardens to allow safe, unstaffed access, reducing staffing costs. Decisions also considered footfall data and demand, aiming to ensure alternative libraries were available nearby when one was closed. Larger libraries like Wath and Riverside typically had longer hours due to scale and demand.

In a supplementary question Councillor Harper asked whether an increase in volunteers during the next five-year strategy could lead to changes in library opening hours mid-cycle rather than waiting until 2027. It was confirmed that this would be possible and that reporting progress at the strategy's midpoint would be beneficial.

Councillor Baggaley asked whether the consultation would include pop-up libraries and engagement with the school library service. It was also queried whether residents could provide feedback specific to their local library and highlighted the need for greater consistency in activities and offerings across libraries, particularly during school holidays and cultural programmes. The Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism noted that 98% of libraries were within 40 minutes of the population, providing good coverage overall. However, it was acknowledged that areas without a library within walking distance could feel disadvantaged. Work was ongoing with communities such as Waverley to create pop-up libraries and strengthen partnerships with parish councils and local groups. Consultation with these communities would form part of the process.

Councillor A Carter raised concerns about using Brinsworth Library as a model for volunteer-led services. It was noted that while volunteers had contributed to its success, the library was supported by a paid staff member funded by the parish council, and opening hours had not significantly increased. Councillor A Carter cautioned against relying on volunteers, which could reduce library provision and professional staffing, and highlighted the unique situation in Brinsworth where RMBC did not fund paid staff. Assurances were sought that paid staff would remain in all libraries and a review of Brinsworth's position to avoid residents paying both parish and borough council tax for statutory library services.

The Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism acknowledged

Brinsworth was a pilot to test a different delivery model, noting that many councils nationally adopted community-led provision with mixed results. It was stated that Brinsworth remained part of RMBC's library offer, benefiting from the library management system, staff training, and close collaboration. The member's concerns would be considered during consultation, including gathering local feedback on Brinsworth's experience and reviewing whether improvements or changes were needed. It was highlighted that significant investment had been made in libraries during the 2021–2026 strategy, with customer satisfaction consistently above 95%, indicating strong overall performance.

In a supplementary question Councillor A Carter expressed concern that Brinsworth Library, as a community-run library, was often overlooked in terms of activities and events offered across the borough. He requested a commitment to ensure volunteer-run libraries, particularly Brinsworth, received the same benefits and opportunities as other libraries, so residents did not have to travel elsewhere for activities. The Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism thanked the Councillor A Carter for his feedback and confirmed that work was underway to define a core offer for all libraries over the next 12 months, setting clear expectations for services and activities. A commitment was made to follow up specifically regarding Brinsworth.

The Chair asked if all elected members would be included in the consultation. It was confirmed that they would and would have the opportunity to provide their views.

Councillor Brent highlighted the need to promote the flexibility of Rotherham Libraries, noting that users could borrow from any library and return items to another, which was a significant benefit. They stressed the importance of communicating this as part of the network offer. Councillor Brent also raised concerns about equality in service provision, noting that while coverage ensures most residents were within 40 minutes of a library, some might want closer access and consistent opening hours. They cautioned that consultation responses should reflect fairness and not be skewed by low participation or isolated preferences.

The Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism noted that Booklink was one example of targeted work delivered despite resource and staffing limitations. An active equalities impact assessment and action plan supported this approach. It was highlighted that the upcoming Year of Reading programme would focus on communities less likely to read, aiming to improve health, education, employment, and wellbeing outcomes. The importance of using rigorous data to meet equality targets was emphasised.

The Vice-Chair noted that the report showed the 10% visitor increase target had not been met and requested more context behind figures. They cited Thrybergh Library as an example, asking for details on the scale of footfall increase following its relocation, including baseline numbers and

percentage growth. The Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism referred to Appendix 3, noting that the 10% visitor increase target had not been met due to reduced visits at Riverside Library. Contributing factors included limited parking during Forge Island development, lack of a café until recently, and slower recovery following a 17-month closure. In contrast, community libraries showed strong performance, with a 24% increase in footfall between 2022–23 and 2024–25, attributed to capital investment and partnership work driven by the Equality Impact Assessment. Plans were in place to improve visitor numbers at Riverside, which were expected to rise significantly with the new town centre library development.

In a supplementary question the Vice-Chair acknowledged the central library as an outlier in visitor data but requested more detailed context for community libraries. They asked for a breakdown of footfall increases, such as at Thrybergh, to understand the return on investment. They also commented positively on libraries evolving to offer additional services but reiterated the need for clearer figures.

Councillor Blackham emphasised the importance of footfall for physical libraries but noted that many communities lacked easy access. They highlighted the need to raise awareness of library services, including online options, and suggested outreach through local organisations such as parish councils and community halls. They gave the example of Woodsetts, where residents were unlikely to travel to Dinnington Library, and asked that alternative ways of reaching such communities be considered in the consultation. The Assistant Director, Culture, Sport & Tourism agreed that reaching underserved communities required working through other organisations and services. Opportunities for co-location were highlighted, with examples such as libraries sharing sites with youth services, early help, leisure centres, and customer services. Co-location was seen as a way to increase access, benefit partner services, and deliver savings through shared assets.

Resolved: That the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board supported the recommendations that Cabinet:

1. Note the review of performance against the 2021–2026 Library Strategy, including key achievements and challenges identified during the Strategy period.
2. Approve the undertaking of a period of consultation with the public, partners, stakeholders and interested parties on the development of a new Library Strategy for the period 2027–2032 and a future service delivery model for the Libraries and Neighbourhood Hubs Service.
3. Agree that a further report be brought to Cabinet following the consultation to present a draft Library Strategy 2027–2032, which will identify potential service improvements and efficiencies.
4. Authorise the Assistant Director of Culture, Sport and Tourism to notify the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) of the intention to consult on the Library Strategy and any potential

changes to service provision.

Further actions that arose from discussions were that:

- OSMB will receive a mid-point progress update on the implementation of the Library Strategy 2027–2032.
- OSMB will receive a detailed breakdown of footfall data for each community library covering the period 2022–23 to 2024–25.

73. ROTHERHAM EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS STRATEGY

At the Chair's invitation Andrew Bramidge, Strategic Director of Regeneration and Environment introduced the report explain that a new Employment Skills Strategy was produced for the Rotherham Together Partnership. It was a partnership strategy, not solely the Council's, setting out the vision and framework for employment skills delivery over the next five years. The previous strategy dated from 2019, and significant changes in the employment skills landscape, along with recent regional and national strategies, made an update necessary.

The strategy was informed by data analysis, stakeholder consultation, and alignment with local, regional, and national priorities. It was built around three missions:

1. Supporting people into work - creating more opportunities for employment and increasing labour market participation, including a system-change approach through Pathways to Work.
2. Improving core skills for employment - enabling lifelong learning and career progression by equipping residents with essential knowledge and skills.
3. Delivering a workforce for sustainable economic growth - working with businesses and partners to attract and develop a skilled workforce to support competitiveness and growth.

Successful delivery relied on collaboration across businesses, education and training providers, the voluntary sector, and residents. Key interventions included targeted support for young people at risk of becoming 'Not in Education, Employment, or Training' (NEET), a borough-wide workforce development plan, and employer-led sector-specific training linked to work placements.

Progress would be monitored through KPIs reported via a data dashboard updated twice yearly. Cabinet was asked to endorse the strategy for 2026-2031, note that the Employment Skills Board would oversee delivery and monitoring, and report annually to Cabinet and the Rotherham Together Partnership.

Councillor Brent noted that careers education should begin early, even in primary school, by building confidence in children to talk about themselves and their interests. In secondary school, emphasis was placed on core subjects, particularly English and Maths, as these are essential for employment. Councillor Brent shared experience from Kent,

where the Skills Employability Service worked closely with schools and a national careers company to deliver proper careers education. This included employer engagement, mentoring, and talks in schools. It was suggested that similar initiatives be considered in Rotherham, involving local employers and council staff to support young people in understanding workplace expectations and developing confidence.

The Strategic Director of Regeneration and Environment noted that there was a strong track record in delivering careers education, with good progress across the region. The service had undertaken significant work with schools to support this. The Assistant Director, Planning, Regeneration and Transport explained it was reported that RIDO worked extensively with secondary schools in Rotherham to deliver careers education, information, and guidance. Schools were connected with enterprise advisors from local employers to raise aspirations and improve engagement. Efforts also focused on enhancing schools' careers provision and improving Gatsby benchmarks, which measure the quality of careers education. Behind the scenes, a careers impact system supported continuous improvement. Gatsby benchmarks were highlighted as key milestones, starting in Year 7 and revisited throughout school, helping staff plan and deliver effective careers education.

A question was raised by Councillor Baggaley regarding the rating system in the table on page 162 of the Agenda Pack, which showed interventions linked to missions and KPIs, marked with one, two, or three ticks. Clarification was sought on how these ratings were applied and whether greater emphasis would be placed on those with three ticks. It was explained that the table illustrated the range of proposed interventions across the partnership.

It was clarified that the ticks in the table were not a scoring or prioritisation system but a matrix showing where priority interventions impacted KPIs and outcomes. All metrics would receive equal commitment, and progress would be monitored through KPIs reported via the data dashboard, updated every six months and reviewed by the Employment Skills Board and Cabinet.

The Assistant Director, Planning, Regeneration and Transport confirmed that all metrics would be monitored and tracked with equal commitment. The strategy was delivered through the Rotherham Together Partnership, with the Employment and Skills Board playing a key role. The Board included major partners such as the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA), local education providers, and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), alongside other stakeholders.

It was noted that the partnership included a wide range of providers from the private, voluntary, and community sectors offering diverse provision. A key challenge for the Council was convening the partnership and supporting customers to navigate what is a complex landscape.

A question was raised by Councillor Blackham regarding the resource implications outlined in section 6.6.2 of the Agenda Pack, specifically whether costs had been calculated and if any would be attributed to the Council. It was explained that further work was required to confirm the accuracy of estimates, identify any potential costs to the Council, and determine how these would be funded. The Assistant Director, Planning, Regeneration and Transport clarified that while the strategy outlined a wide range of interventions to achieve its missions over five years, it did not provide approval for all projects that may arise. Some interventions could have varying financial implications, and any individual projects or programmes would require separate funding approvals as they are developed.

Clarification was provided that the report set out the strategic approach to delivering employment and skills provision, not funding approvals. No budgets were approved as part of this report. Any future interventions or programmes, such as Pathways to Work, would require separate funding approvals. The paragraph in question simply confirmed that financial implications would be considered at the project level, not within this overarching strategy.

A question was raised by Councillor Blackham about interventions to address health-related barriers to work and how success would be measured, given that economic inactivity in Rotherham was around 20%, with long-term sickness a major factor. It was noted that economic inactivity was a key issue and that the Pathways to Work programme, introduced earlier in the year, was one of the initiatives aimed at tackling these barriers.

Further detail was provided on the Pathways to Work programme, which adopted a system-wide approach to tackling economic inactivity and health-related barriers. The programme comprised two elements: the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer, led by local authorities, and the Health Growth Accelerator, led by health partners. Both focused on holistic support rather than siloed interventions. Participants were triaged through a single system and referred to personalised support, which could include DWP-funded programmes, voluntary sector provision, council services, training, mental health support, employer engagement for reasonable adjustments, and clinical interventions via the NHS (e.g., physiotherapy, pain management, talking therapies). This approach aimed to simplify access and provide wraparound support to address multiple barriers to work.

The Vice-Chair raised a question about measurement and whether specific numerical targets were included in the strategy, noting that the report referred to percentage decreases in inactivity without stating figures. It was confirmed that the strategy was based on a robust data exercise and that detailed data, including numbers and percentages, was available and could be shared. Progress would be monitored through KPIs and a data dashboard, reviewed by the Employment Skills Board

and Cabinet annually. It was suggested that including specific targets in the report would strengthen accountability.

The Assistant Director, Planning, Regeneration and Transport confirmed that once the baseline and strategy were agreed, the Employment and Skills Board would set annual targets. For the current year, the Pathways to Work programme aimed to support 400 people out of economic inactivity and back into employment. Individual programme outputs would contribute to overall strategic targets.

In response to further questions, further clarification was provided on target setting. New baseline figures from the data dashboard had just been received and would form the basis for the strategy, subject to endorsement by the Council and approval by the Rotherham Together Partnership. The Employment and Skills Board would set annual targets in conjunction with partners, aligned to the financial year. It was confirmed that the current target for the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer was to support 400 people back into employment, delivered through a mix of council teams and 11 community organisations. Members requested that progress reports include costs for transparency, as activity creates financial implications.

Resolved: That the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board supported the recommendations that Cabinet:

1. Endorses the formal adoption of the Rotherham Employment and Skills Strategy 2026-31.
2. Notes that the Rotherham Employment and Skills Board is tasked with overseeing the delivery and monitoring of the Strategy and with reporting on progress to Cabinet and the Rotherham Together Partnership (RTP) on an annual basis.

Further actions that arose from discussions were that:

- OSMB will receive a follow-up report in September 2026, providing an update on performance against the agreed targets, along with detailed information on any additional costs incurred for activities undertaken

74. WORK PROGRAMME

The Board considered the published work programme. An update was provided on the spotlight review for life-saving equipment and related by-laws: the outstanding information had been received and would be circulated to review group members. Availability would be sought to convene a meeting to continue the review.

Resolved: That the Work Programme be approved.

75. WORK IN PROGRESS - SELECT COMMISSIONS

At its meeting on 20 November 2025, the Health Select Commission scrutinised the draft Adult Social Care Mental Health Strategy 2026–29. Members discussed issues including rising depression rates in Rotherham, transition pathways, integration with housing and health partners, support for minority groups, loneliness, male suicide rates, and success measures. The Commission supported recommending Cabinet approval of the strategy and requested a delivery plan with measurable targets and KPIs, a mid-point update in 2027, early involvement in future strategy development, and provision of detailed data on loneliness and male suicide rates. Contact between Rotherham Speak Up and Autism services was also requested.

The Commission also considered the Rotherham Place Partners Winter Plan 2025–26, reviewing preparedness for winter pressures. Discussions covered GP contract changes, industrial action, ambulance response times, flu peaks, escalation processes, and discharge delays. Members requested improvements to the accessibility of the plan and agreed to share research on reducing slips and trips in care settings with the ICB.

Updates were provided on the work programme. The Access to Contraception Review had completed evidence gathering in October and was drafting recommendations. A joint workshop with the Improving Lives Select Commission on 28 November examined the draft All Age Carers Strategy 2026–31, focusing on challenges for young carers, systemic barriers, financial support, and KPIs. Members supported recommending Cabinet approval with amendments to include local data and strengthen early identification of young carers. Actions included reviewing the associated action plan in 2026/27, receiving a mid-point update in 2028/29, and early involvement in future strategy refresh. Arrangements were also underway for a site visit to the Same Day Emergency Care Centre at TRFT in early 2026 ahead of a performance update in March.

The next HSC meeting on 22 January 2026 was scheduled to consider the Rotherham Safeguarding Adults Board Annual Report and Strategic Plan 2025–28 and the Adult Social Care CQC Inspection.

At its meeting on 2 December 2025, the Improving Lives Select Commission reviewed the Fostering Transformation Programme, considering changing sufficiency needs for children and young people in care and the Council's response to the tragic death of Marcia Grant, including the formal Prevention of Future Deaths report following the July 2025 inquest. Members also received the Rotherham Safeguarding Children's Partnership Annual Assurance Report for 2024–25, which outlined key partnership activity, impact against strategic priorities, Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, and the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements.

Updates were provided on the work programme. A dual workshop session was being arranged on the Threshold of Need, including a visit to the Rotherham Parent Carers Forum, to review vision and plans and strengthen community voice. A workshop on the PAUSE Project, which supports women who have had children removed, was planned for late February or early March, and a Children's Capital of Culture workshop on impact and legacy for young people was scheduled for late March or early April. The Safeguarding Adults Board Strategic Plan and Annual Report would be considered by the Health Select Commission on 22 January 2026, with an invitation extended to Improving Lives members. The scope of the Trauma and Children Missing Education Scrutiny Review was agreed on 1 December and would now proceed.

Future meetings were scheduled to include the Ofsted Inspection Outcome and Educational Attainment Update on 10 February 2026, and on 28 April 2026, the SACRE Annual Report, Children Not in School Update, and Community Cohesion Projects Update.

There had been no further Improving Places Select Commission meeting since the last OSMB meeting. The next meeting was scheduled for 16 December 2025 to consider the Bereavement Services Annual Report and the Thriving Neighbourhoods Annual Report. Updates were provided on the work programme. The School Road Safety Review sub-group had met with RMBC Highways and Sheffield City Council officers to discuss the School Streets scheme and would next examine crossing patrol and enforcement.

The Anti-Social Behaviour workshop was scheduled for 4 December 2025, with feedback to follow. A joint Market and Library Redevelopment site visit for OSMB and IPSC members, originally planned for mid-December, was rescheduled for early 2026 due to site inaccessibility during ongoing works.

76. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

The Forward Plan of Key Decisions was reviewed, noting that the Council Plan and Year Ahead Delivery Plan progress update was scheduled for pre-decision scrutiny, with an invitation to the Leader for a question-and-answer session. Confirmation was awaited on whether a Medium-Term Financial Strategy presentation would also be included on the January 2026 agenda.

The forward plan for January was outlined, including reports on the Council Homes Housing Delivery Programme, November Financial Monitoring, property transactions, Strategic Community Infrastructure Levy update, tenant satisfaction measures and housing regulatory compliance, the Council Plan, Family Hub progress update, and an extension and new application for business rates relief for Rotherham Families First.

Members agreed to add the Strategic Community Infrastructure Levy and November's financial monitoring to the agenda. It was confirmed that the Leader would attend the January meeting, and the Mayor of South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA) had been invited to the February meeting for a Q&A session, with confirmation awaited.

Members noted that the Mayor of SYMCA may gain additional powers in future, including responsibility for fire authorities from 2027, and raised concerns about potential changes to licensing and planning powers. It was reported that Rotherham had written to the Secretary of State to express concerns. A comment was made regarding limited scrutiny time at South Yorkshire Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings with the Mayor, and a request was noted to increase both the duration and frequency of these sessions.

Resolved: That the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board:

1. Agreed that the following items would be added to the December agenda as part of OSMB's pre-decision scrutiny work:
 - Council Plan and Year Ahead Delivery Plan Progress Update – Pre-decision scrutiny.
 - November 2025-26 Financial Monitoring Report – Pre-decision scrutiny.
 - Strategic Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Update – Pre-decision scrutiny.
 - Leader Q&A - to be scheduled after Council plan on the agenda.
 - MTFS Presentation (TBC).

77. SOUTH YORKSHIRE MAYORAL COMBINED AUTHORITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Chair reported that there was nothing to update from the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority.

78. CALL-IN ISSUES

There were no call-in issues.

79. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no urgent items.