

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD
Wednesday 23 March 2022

Present:- Councillor T. Collingham (in the Chair); Councillors Baker-Rogers, A Carter, Cooksey and Wyatt.

Apologies for absence:- Apologies were received from Councillors Clark, Baum-Dixon, Burnett, Cowen, Elliott, Pitchley and Yasseen.

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

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

1. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved: - That the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board held on 9 February 2022 be approved as a true record.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

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

4. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

There were no items that required the exclusion of the press or public.

5. COVID RECOVERY FUND

Consideration was given to a report that was submitted for pre-decision scrutiny ahead of the Cabinet Meeting to be held on 28 March 2022. The Cabinet agreed on 19 July 2021, to earmark £2m for a Covid Recovery Fund from the underspend position, with authority delegated to the Cabinet for its use. The Budget and Council Tax Report 2022/23, approved at Council on 2 March 2022, set out the first use of the Covid Recovery Fund, allocating £371k of the fund towards three one-off revenue budget investments for 2022/23, these were:

- Women's Euro 2022
- Additional Customer Call Handling
- Customer and Digital Developments

The report set out further proposals for use of the Covid Recovery Fund across the following areas:

- £500k Cash grant scheme to provide support for households with

the rising cost of energy bills.

- £300k additional funding to top up the Councils Discretionary Housing Payments fund. £100k to support cultural recovery events and opportunities that will enable people to reconnect.
- £50k to facilitate the administration of these proposals.

The remaining funding of £679k was to be retained within the Covid Recovery Fund so that further support could be targeted at issues that arise as the course of the borough's recovery from Covid continued.

The Leader of the Council, Cllr Chris Read, introduced the item. It was recognised that many residents faced acute financial pressures which had emerged post-pandemic, including rising inflation and energy prices. It was outlined that £500k would be set aside to help those most in need, identifying that approximately 2000 households would be eligible for a one-off payment of £250 to assist with energy bills. Financial advice would also sit alongside this scheme, and it was anticipated that most of those eligible for payment would already be working with advice services.

A further £300k had been allocated to Discretionary Housing Payments, which provided financial support to those in private or social housing who required assistance to pay their rent. It was anticipated that more people would face increasing financial difficulties in rented accommodation and the additional funds gave further resilience to address issues as they arose.

An additional top-up of £100k had been allocated to support events, recognising the importance of encouraging people to socialise and interact in their communities post-pandemic. It was reported anecdotally that levels of participation had fallen, particularly for older people. There were concerns that lower levels of engagement may mean that more vulnerable people were isolated with consequent impacts on health and well-being. The additional funds gave greater capacity to support future events and community engagement, including those organised to celebrate the forthcoming Jubilee.

The remaining £679k would be held to support any future covid-recovery issues and would be subject to on-going monitoring to ensure a flexible response should further cost of living pressures arise.

In respect of assistance with energy costs, it was asked if support would be rolled out during winter months when energy use and bills would be greater. It was outlined that the criteria would focus on those in acute crisis. It was anticipated that the majority of those eligible would be referred by advice services and/or apply online. This process would be "light touch", but evidence of financial hardship would need to be provided. The scheme would be subject to review however, it was important to move swiftly to respond to imminent price rises in April.

Details were asked of the application process and if support would be

given to those who were unable to apply online. It was confirmed that face-to-face and telephone support would be available as well as publicising via voluntary and community sector channels.

Clarification was sought on the eligibility criteria and if homeowners or people who may not claim benefits could apply for assistance as inflation, rising interest rates and energy costs would also have an impact on their living standards. It was explained that assistance with energy costs would be available to eligible households regardless of tenure, however discretionary housing payments were only payable to those in rented accommodation. The wider impact on households, including owner-occupiers would be monitored and proposals brought back if appropriate.

The committee welcomed the proposals outlined in the report. It was explained that the fund was not time limited and was to be used at the discretion of the Council to support the borough's post-covid recovery.

Further details were asked about events to celebrate the Jubilee. It was outlined that there would be a central event arranged in Clifton Park with small-scale events being organised in parishes and neighbourhood. Clarification was sought on the application process for small grants and assurance was given that this would be circulated at the earliest opportunity.

Resolved: -

- 1) That Cabinet be advised that the recommendations be supported.
- 2) That guidance is issued as soon as is practicable on the application process for community events.

6. SOCIAL VALUE ANNUAL REPORT

Consideration was given to a report that was submitted for pre-decision scrutiny ahead of the Cabinet Meeting to be held on 28 March 2022. This is the second annual report to be submitted since adoption of the Social Value Policy in 2019.

The aim of the Social Value Policy was to maximise the local impact of the Council's spend:

- Raising the living standards of Rotherham residents and commitment to working towards the Living Wage Foundation Living Wage.
- Increasing the proportion of the Council's expenditure which went to local businesses and providers.
- Building social value into all council contracts and maximise the impact gained from every pound spent, through the introduction of a rigorous system for assessing and measuring social value.
- Commit to the principle of co-designing services wherever possible.

The report outlined that the Council had either achieved or made progress against the commitments agreed in February 2021. These included:

- The Social Value Commissioning Toolkit was in the final stages of development and about to be rolled out.
- Accreditation as a “Living Wage Employer” was awarded in September.
- Anchor networks development was underway with key partners building on the commitments from the partnership Social Value Charter.
- The Council was positively engaged in the development of social value policy and practice in the Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA).
- A workshop was held to explore further community wealth building opportunities.
- An event has been held to engage with suppliers. This provided real examples of good practice in social value. The event will be repeated on an annual basis.

The Leader of the Council introduced the report with contributions from the Chief Executive and officers. It was outlined that this was the second full year of the commitment with significant progress being made. It was noted that the benefits of this policy may take some time to realise as changes may occur over the course of contracts. The Leader put on record the achievement of “real living wage” accreditation and noted that over 3000 people in Rotherham had directly benefited from this status.

The contribution of the Rotherham Together Partnership to this agenda was ongoing but progress had been hampered by the pandemic. The Leader drew attention to positive developments with the MCA with regards to procurement and business grants which supported social value principles and net zero commitments.

The Chief Executive and Leader noted the contribution of the Head of Procurement to this agenda and her work with partners in developing the Council's approach, including the Social Value Portal.

Since the last annual report, commitment has been secured from local businesses, taking the principles of social value into their organisations. Consideration has been given to how the Council commissions its services and contractual arrangements. Work was also underway the MCA across the sub-region to ensure that a joint approach underpinned commissioning and procurement activities. Work has been undertaken to identify community wealth opportunities to identify with business where there were gaps in types of organisations, products or services. Audits had evidenced that a greater number of contracts were being procured locally.

Further information was provided on the impact of the policy, which

included greater numbers of people in employment and apprenticeships. It was noted that the high-level figures did not reflect fully the positive changes made as a result of the policy. This would be addressed in future annual reports.

Over the next twelve months, the Council would remain fully committed to this agenda and work closely with anchor institutions such as South Yorkshire Police, colleges and the hospital to ensure that a similar approach was taken to maximise local spend and opportunities.

Clarification was sought on how the achievements compared with the original aims of the policy, and how benefits to Rotherham residents was demonstrated. The roll out of the real living wage and number of people accessing employment or training opportunities from local contracts was cited as key performance indicators.

The Council's work with contractors and sub-contractors in achieving real living wage status was supported as were initiatives to engage business. Details were sought of how the Council could influence those local business who it did not contract with. It was explained that events had been organised with local business champions and peer networks showcasing good working standards and practices and the benefits for their business and the wider community. A further question was asked about the influence the Council had with non-local contractors. It was outlined that the expectation that national providers would comply with social value principles was the same as local businesses. The Council and its partners proactively shared information with local businesses about contracts and commissioning to build economies of scale or create opportunities for diversification.

It was noted that many contracts were borough wide, however, it was also noted that some contracts would be provided in specific localities. It was asked if certain areas in greater need were targeted for initiatives which could increase social value. It was noted that particularly with locality-based contracts, businesses had explored how they could add social value locally, particularly jobs and skills and engaging with the voluntary and community sector.

The non-contractual contributions of businesses to local communities was cited, with a question ask how social responsibility and social capital could be captured. It was noted that the social value policy had clear targets to deliver wider benefits through its contractual and commissioning arrangements.

It was noted that key performance data was only available for part year and a request was made for updates to be provided to the committee. It was confirmed that this was available as data is captured on a quarterly basis.

Information was sought if there had been a change in the numbers and

types of businesses seeking contracts and was there evidence of a change in approach in respect of national businesses. With some national providers, it was noted that discussions had taken place to ensure that there was a local social value benefit specific to Rotherham (e.g. apprenticeships or skills training). Early market engagements was also taking place to ensure that businesses understood social value prior to bid submission so businesses were better placed to meet requirements.

It was clarified that the Council was not paying more for contracts through its commitment to social value objectives, rather that it was an expectation on business to engage with this agenda as part of their contractual arrangements. Acknowledging the Leader's opening statement, it was noted that the outcomes from the adoption of a social value policy may take some time to realise and asked that further work be undertaken to demonstrate the benefits.

Resolved: -

1. That Cabinet be advised that the recommendations be supported.
2. That consideration be given to how the impact of the Social Value strategy is demonstrated in future annual reports.
3. That consideration is given to how businesses and voluntary/community organisations' contribution to 'social responsibility' is captured.
4. That a further report is submitted to OSMB in six months outlining mid-year position.

7. DIGITAL STRATEGY - PROGRESS REPORT

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Community Safety and Finance introduced the item. Consideration was given to a report providing an update on the progress on the delivery of the Digital Strategy. The strategy was first considered by this committee prior to its approval by Cabinet in February 2021. It asked that a progress report be submitted in twelve months.

The report detailed progress against four main strands of the strategy which were as follows:

- Digital Collaboration;
- Digital Customer Services;
- Digital Borough;
- Digital Workforce.

It was noted that the effect of and continued response to the pandemic had impacted on what had achieved. Despite these pressures, the report outlined areas of delivery which included:

- a) Full upgrade of the 'People's Network' which had seen the installation of new public access computers in all libraries.
- b) Establishment of a digital inclusion programme, working alongside the voluntary and community sector and other partners, including Health.
- c) Development of telephony automation to better direct calls made to the general enquiries number.
- d) Facilitated the commercial investment and delivery of full fibre connectivity across the Rotherham district over the next two years.
- e) Extension of Microsoft Teams to support collaborative working with external partners, other local authorities and suppliers.
- f) An agreed installation programme of 'hybrid meeting' technology across the Council's accommodation portfolio.
- g) A complete upgrade to the Council's servers and databases to ensure they were secure, compliant and remain fully supported. It was noted that the Council had been awarded PSN accreditation.

Reference was made to the "People's Network" and how residents could access services particularly if there was no library in their immediate vicinity. The Assistant Director of Customer, Information and Digital Services outlined the work that was taking place to extend digital inclusion across neighbourhoods, including those areas not covered by libraries and with specific communities who may have higher levels of digital exclusion. The programme aimed to better understand what digital inclusion 'looked like' in Rotherham, the reasons why people experienced digital exclusion and tailor services accordingly to meet identified gaps. The Head of Digital Services highlighted that work was underway with Housing Services to connect Neighbourhood Centres and ensure wider coverage, details of which would be circulated to members of this committee.

Clarification was sought on what progress had been made to ensure that disabled people were not excluded digitally. The digital inclusion programme would look specifically at the needs of certain resident groups, including disabled people. The outcomes of the research and consultation with groups and residents would be fed into the strategy and inform future actions.

Further details were sought of how hybrid meeting would be rolled out and if elected members could participate remotely (for example if they could not attend meetings due to illness). The Democratic Services Manager confirmed that the technology for hybrid meetings was to be rolled out. However, clarification was given that elected members could only participate in decision making meetings by attending in person. It was clarified that external agencies would be able to participate in Council meetings through hybrid technology as their physical attendance was not required as part of the decision-making process. The Democratic Services Manager committed to seeking further details.

It was noted that investments had been made to improve call-handlings and customer services and it was asked what this would mean for customers contacting the Council by telephone. It was outlined that customers who were able to access services digitally were being encouraged to do so. However, it was recognised that some customers would still require face-to-face or telephone contact. More services were being moved online but as processes embed, there was still a need for call-handlers to respond to demand. There had been an analysis of the types of call, length of wait etc, with a view to piloting initiatives to improve the customer experience. This included a call-back facility which had been received positively, reducing the number of people in queues. It was noted that call volume had increased as services re-opened following the pandemic.

It was noted that a greater number of services and appointments would be accessed through online forms. However, an example was given that some booking systems were difficult to navigate and resulted in the customer having to call the service directly. Details were sought on whether this issue was widespread and what were the plans for improving the user experience. It was acknowledged that the system in question was out-of-date and was in need of improvement. Examples were given of developments in other services such as booking bulky waste collection it was anticipated that the learning from such initiatives would be applied across the Council.

Options for extending website accessibility were explored including the use of webchat. A major focus of the strategy was supporting those who were unable to access digital services and were reliant on telephone contact. Digital chat would be considered however, the priority was to reduce waiting times for those customers using telephones who were often more vulnerable. A further question was asked about the provision of accessible software (speech-to-text, filters etc) and if this had been considered. Significant work has been undertaken to test the accessibility of the website which had been monitored by external assessors recently, scoring 97% rating on its accessibility scale. Customers with specific access requirements have worked with officers to offer feedback and guidance on website development and it was highlighted that officers were open to receiving suggestions about future improvements and examples of good practice.

Further details were sought on how easy it was to use mobile technologies to access services and if there was a 'casework' system for residents to report issues. It was outlined that there was an equivalent 'casework' system on the website under "Your Account" which was being developed. It was planned that more services would be accessed using this platform. In respect of mobile technology, it was highlighted that over 80% of the Council's website traffic was through mobile phones. Apps were being developed and piloted, including those with voice interaction.

Resolved: -

- 1) That the current progress on the delivery of the Digital Strategy is noted.
- 2) That an update is provided to this committee on the strategy's progress in twelve months.
- 3) That clarification is provided by the Democratic Services Manager on the roll-out of hybrid technology for meetings of the Council.

8. WORK PROGRAMME

The Board considered its work programme and items for future prioritisation.

Resolved: - That the Work Programme be approved.

9. WORK IN PROGRESS - SELECT COMMISSIONS

The Chair of Improving Places Select Commission and Vice-Chair of Improving Lives Select Commission provided an update of the work of their commissions.

Resolved: -

That the updates be noted.

10. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS - 1 MARCH 2022 - 31 MAY 2022

The Board considered the Forward Plan of Key Decisions 1 March 2022 to 31 May 2022.

Resolved: -

- 1) That the Forward Plan be noted.
- 2) That the Annual Housing Development Report 2022-23 and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy be considered for pre-decision scrutiny at the meeting of 20 April 2022.

11. CALL-IN ISSUES

There were no call-in issues.

12. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no urgent items.

13. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

Resolved: - That the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board will be held at 11am on Wednesday 20 April 2022 at Rotherham Town Hall.