

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD
Wednesday 13 September 2023

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

Apologies for absence:- Apologies were received from Councillors Miro and Wyatt.

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

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

37. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 5 JULY 2023 AND 2 AUGUST 2023

Resolved: - That the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board held on 5 July 2023 and 2 August 2023 be approved as a true record.

38. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

39. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

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

40. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

There were no exempt items.

41. LGA CORPORATE PEER CHALLENGE REPORT AND ACTION PLAN

The Chair invited the Leader of the Council to introduce Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) Report and Action Plan. It was outlined that authorities were encouraged to have a peer review at least once every five years and the process was a way of assessing where local authorities are in terms of the financial visibility, service delivery and organisational health. CPCs were focused on ensuring that Councils have the capacity, governance, leadership, and finance to deliver their ambition. The process was not an inspection and was designed to be forward-looking to help accelerate and drive improvement.

During the Council's CPC, the peer team considered the following five themes, which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges:

- 1) local priorities and outcomes
- 2) organisational and place leadership

- 3) governance and culture
- 4) financial planning and management
- 5) capacity for improvement.

In addition to these five areas, it was outlined that the Council asked the peer team to provide observations and feedback on the Council's progress in the last five years and the work been undertaken to create an inclusive economy.

The CPC was delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers who were selected by the LGA based on their relevant expertise. The review took place in June 2023 and during this time the team gathered information from over 40 meetings; spoke to over hundred people including council staff and members and external stakeholders: reviewed over 70 pieces of evidence and went on a tour of the town centre and parts of the wider Borough.

The CPC feedback report provided a summary of the team's findings, which noted that the council was an impressive organisation that served the town well.

The report included seven recommendations to support the Council's continuous improvement journey:

- Recommendation 1: that the Council's achievements be celebrated.
- Recommendation 2: that an externally facing narrative of place be developed to promote and market the borough and capitalise on Rotherham's assets.
- Recommendation 3: that the significant investments underway be used to support a more inclusive economic future.
- Recommendation 4: that effective pathways and mechanisms for local people, especially young people, be developed to benefit from inclusive growth to help deliver improved health outcomes and address inequalities.
- Recommendation 5: that performance management be reviewed to demonstrate impact and an improvement in outcomes in delivering the council's ambition; and the strong leadership, capacity and capability of the top-team be used to drive and deliver further organisational transformations and change across the borough at pace.
- Recommendation 6: that the Neighbourhood working model be built upon , to develop a clearer and shared understanding of integrated locality working across the public sector and increase the pace of digital transformation across the organisation to deliver improved outcomes for residents and the customer experience.
- Recommendation 7: that the medium-term financial strategy be kept under review – testing assumptions and undertaking sensitivity – and reported to Members on a regular basis.

A high-level action plan had been developed in response to the findings (attached as appendix 2), which would be overseen by the Chief Executive. Examples were given of initiatives being undertaken against each of the recommendations. Once approved the action plan would be published on both the Council's and the LGA's website. A progress review would be scheduled in 2024, with a further progress report published 12 months after the CPC.

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

- The commitment to celebrate the Borough's achievements was welcomed, particularly in respect of the Advanced Manufacturing Park.
- Further clarification was sought on who the stakeholders were and the time scales for discussions to take place. It was clarified that this involved the Rotherham Together Partnership, public sector partners, the Chamber of Commerce and a number of private sector stakeholders. The meeting will take place in the next eight weeks.
- It was noted that there was a recommendation to engage with the workforce to obtain their ideas for capturing success and sharing these ideas, clarification was sought whether this would also be undertaken with residents. The Leader outlined that the Communications Team had been challenged to seek ways for Rotherham residents to speak in their own words about the things that worked for them and what was going well.
- Further detail was requested about how negative perceptions of the town centre (including safety) could be challenged. The significant investment into public realm was cited and the developments of the cinema and restaurants were referenced as positive improvements.
- Continued oversight of financial planning and management was identified as a key challenge, given current economic volatility, budget pressures and service demands. It was noted that the council's planning was cited in the report as "robust" and it was noted that there was strong stewardship of financial resources.
- The comments in respect of equality, diversity and inclusion were noted. It was felt that further work could be undertaken to understand communities and strengthen the Council's approach to equalities.
- Further details were sought about communications and sharing information within wards. It was observed that the ward newsletters were important in making sure that people understood what was happening in their immediate community as well as the borough more broadly.
- Clarification was sought if there was a dis-proportionate focus on town centre investment compared with other parts of the borough. The Leader outlined the investments which had been undertaken as part of the town and villages fund scheme across Rotherham.

However, he suggested that town centre improvements would play a significant role in improving perceptions of the borough as a whole. Town centre regeneration had emerged as a clear priority in extensive consultation undertaken with residents.

- Details were sought about how the review team had been selected. It was outlined that the LGA had selected the peers and that the approach taken was standard practice.
- It was noted that a number of retail premises were empty. It was clarified that the Council had relatively few shop properties in the town centre however, it was noted that work was being undertaken with landlords to address shopfront dressings. It was recognised that this was a short-term measure.
- The Section 151 Officer offered assurances that the accounts, general reserves, associated risks, and financial planning was under constant review from appropriate bodies, including the Audit Committee and external auditors. It was outlined that whilst general reserves may be lower in comparison to other authorities, the auditors were satisfied that these were at a safe level.

Resolved:

- 1) That a further report be submitted to the Board following the six month progress check prior to the end of the current municipal year.
- 2) That Cabinet be advised that the following recommendations be supported:

That Cabinet:

1. Note the observations and key recommendations made by the Corporate Peer Team to the Council.
2. Approve the high-level action plan which is the Council's response to the findings.

42. DIGITAL INCLUSION STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

The Chair invited the Leader to introduce the report. He outlined that digital exclusion was a challenge for some people in Rotherham and the lack of digital access could have a detrimental impact on residents. The associated problems of poor digital access could be significant for citizens and families contributing to educational and economic disadvantage, health inequalities and increased social isolation.

The Rotherham Place Digital Inclusion programme was established in 2021 to gain a better understanding of the extent to which digital exclusion affected local communities; and to identify the barriers that prevent people accessing and benefiting from online services and digital

channels.

Through consultations held with a wide range of local people, the cross-organisational Digital Inclusion Stakeholder group had co-created a digital inclusion strategy and action plan designed to target those in the borough that are most at risk of digital exclusion.

The purpose of this report was to provide an update on the progress of the Rotherham Place Digital Inclusion programme and seek endorsement and support to the approach undertaken.

The community engagement exercise highlighted that the following groups were more the risk of digital exclusion: older people, people from more deprived backgrounds people with long-term health conditions and younger people. It was also highlighted that certain locations in the borough faced greater challenges, for example East Herringthorpe, Central Rotherham and Maltby. This could relate to lack of access to devices, poor access to reliable broadband or affordability.

The Council was working with Rotherham North Notts College and students had engaged with residents directly to help address some of these issues. Community drop-in sessions were organised to provide information and support, including links to skills training. Free sim cards with a data allowance had been allocated under the national databank project. This was currently offered from Riverside House and the scheme would be rolled out to libraries in Maltby, Rawmarsh, Dinnington and Swinton. Staff had been recruited to support the project.

The Assistant Director for Customer Information & Digital Services outlined that matched funding had been received from health partners for the duration of the action plan and there was a commitment to look at long-term sustainability of this work.

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

- Clarification was sought on engagement via postal surveys and focus groups in areas of higher deprivation. It was highlighted that the postal survey was sent to a random sample of residents who had been contacted for a previous engagement exercise. The survey findings had been used to inform the action plan and areas of focus.
- Details of how the programme would be rolled out on areas of greater deprivation was sought. It was outlined that work was underway with health and third sector partners to identify suitable venues for delivery, particularly in those areas which did not have libraries or customer service centres.
- A question was asked about the programme's long-term sustainability and how existing infrastructure or gaps in provision was mapped. It was felt that achieving digital inclusion would be an

ongoing challenge and further work was needed with local communities. It was highlighted that the support staff would link with local groups and opportunities to build capacity. The work with the local college was welcomed.

- Clarification was sought if there safeguards in place to protect vulnerable people from digital exploitation (e.g scams). It was confirmed that digital safety was a key part of the programme.
- It was also highlighted that the purpose of the programme was to enable residents to access online information to improve their personal lives, including access to education, job searching or leisure activities. It was noted that local elected members had a good understanding and awareness of local groups and facilities within their wards.
- With reference to the strategy to renew wifi across those Council buildings in long-term use, clarification was sought if this could be rolled out to community centres or other venues. It was noted that the programme operated within limited resources, therefore it was not feasible to renew wifi across all areas.

Resolved:

1. That Cabinet be advised that the following recommendations be supported:

That Cabinet:

- 1) Notes the work undertaken to date as part of the Digital Inclusion programme.
- 2) Endorse the co-designed Digital Inclusion Strategy and support the approach being taken to help people and communities who are most at risk from digital exclusion

43. JULY 2023-24 FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT

The Chair invited the Leader to introduce the report. The report set out the financial position as at the end of July 2023 and forecast for the remainder of the financial year, based on actual costs and income for the first four months of 2023/24. Financial performance was a key element within the assessment of the Council's overall performance framework and essential to achievement of the objectives within the Council's policy agenda.

As at July 2023, the Council estimated an overspend of £4.5m for the financial year 2023/24. This was largely due to demand led pressures on Children's residential placements and home to school transport as well as the impact of inflationary pressures in the economy, particularly on food prices, and the legacy impact of lockdown restrictions on some directorate's services, especially in R&E. The current economic climate remained turbulent, with challenges in projecting inflationary movements. At present inflation was showing signs of slowing owing to reductions in energy and fuel prices. This would help support the Council's Budget

position for 2022/23, though it was too early in the financial year to be clear on its full benefit.

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

- Clarification was sought on the use of hotels to house homeless people and if a decrease in expenditure was expected in the next quarter. It was outlined that there were 40 additional emergency placements to meet some demand, however, there were greater numbers of people requiring support.
- Further details were sought on reducing the use of agency staff. It was outlined that efforts were made to start the recruitment process for vacant posts promptly to reduce reliance on agency posts. There had been a number of in-depth reviews that had led to agency cost reductions.
- Clarification was sought on what efforts had been made to identify other areas for possible savings. It was confirmed that there was a continuous process of check and challenge to identify budget pressures and opportunities for additional funding or savings.
- The high costs relating to children's social care were noted, further details were sought on the reasons behind this and what was being done to address the issues. It was outlined that there was enormous competition for available places and private providers had raised prices in light of demand. An overview of the in-house residential placement programme and fostering campaigns were outlined. The demand pressures placed by accommodating unaccompanied asylum seekers were referenced.
- It was noted that the 'invest to save' budget decisions taken in previous years, had led to a reduction in overspends.
- The Fostering Service was praised for its work.

Resolved:

1. That Cabinet be advised that the following recommendations be supported:

That Cabinet:

- 1) Note the current General Fund Revenue Budget forecast overspend of £4.5m.
- 2) Note that actions will continue to be taken to reduce the overspend position but that it is possible that the Council will need to draw on its reserves to balance the 2023/24 financial position.
- 3) That Cabinet approve the capital budget variations as detailed in section 2.61 of the report.

44. WORK PROGRAMME

The Board considered its Work Programme.

Resolved: - That the Work Programme be approved.

45. WORK IN PROGRESS - SELECT COMMISSIONS

The Chair of Improving Lives Select Commission gave an update on the work programme and its work on elective home education.

46. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS - 1 SEPTEMBER 2023 TO 30 NOVEMBER 2023

The Board considered the Forward Plan of Key Decisions 1 September 2023 to 30 November 2023.

Resolved: - That the Forward Plan be noted.

47. CALL-IN ISSUES

There were no call-in issues.

48. URGENT BUSINESS

There were no urgent items.

49. 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 11 October 2023 at Rotherham Town Hall.