

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD
Wednesday, 16th January, 2019

Present:- Councillor Steele (in the Chair); Councillors Cowles, Brookes, Evans, Keenan, Napper, Sansome, Short, Walsh and Wyatt.

Apologies were received from Councillors Cusworth and Mallinder.

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

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

30. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

31. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND THE PRESS

A member of the public attended the meeting and referred to a meeting he had held with the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Management Board concerning a response from the Board to a request to review a petition. In that meeting, the Chair had explained the Corporate Complaints Procedure and the provision for Stage 3 Hearings by Members. Following that, the member of the public had contacted the Complaints Team who had advised that his particular complaint could not be referred to Stage 3 and the question was put as to why this would not be possible.

In response, the Chair indicated that he would need to raise this specific issue with the officers concerned to establish what the issue was.

By way of a supplementary question, the member of the public enquired whether the Chair considered it possible that he would not have to attend a future scrutiny meeting in his capacity as a member of the public in connection with changes to learning disability services.

In response, the Chair indicated that this was not supplementary to the original question and that he could not comment on the issue raised.

32. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Chair reported that there were no items of business on the agenda that would require the exclusion of the press or public from the meeting.

33. AMENDMENTS TO THE HOUSING ALLOCATION POLICY - JANUARY 2019

Consideration was given to a report which was due to be considered by the Cabinet at its meeting on 21 January 2019 in respect of proposed amendments to the Housing Allocation Policy. It was reported that the Council was required to allocate Social Housing according to a published Allocations Policy.

Members noted that Rotherham's Housing Allocation Policy was last fully reviewed in February 2017. The policy outlined who could seek re-housing through the local authority, the properties they could apply for and how people were prioritised for available homes. There were certain circumstances when the Allocation Policy needed to be adjusted, including when there were legislative changes, if there were changes in supply and demand or when equality data requires a change the way properties were allocated. The five proposed amendments addressed some of those issues and would also help to prevent homelessness earlier, reduce waiting time for households with a medical need and apply consistent approaches within the policy for people who wished to move to a smaller home.

Members welcomed the report and recommendations, applauding the approach to simplifying the process, but raised concerns in respect of the allocation of properties in small communities of older people to disruptive, young people. Reference was made to the problems that this caused those communities, councillors representing those communities and the officers in the Housing Services and the need to respect the rights of existing residents not to be disturbed by new residents who may not be best suited to a particular street or neighbourhood. In response, it was confirmed that officers vet individuals before they were offered a property, with the Area Housing Officer having the final decision in respect of allocating a property to an individual. Where there were concerns, those would be referred to a Head of Service to refuse a property. Tenancy Support Officers were available to assist in such circumstances and handle referrals. It was further explained by the Cabinet Member that properties were allocated on a basis of need, but there were occasions where things would go wrong and individuals would need to be supported through that process.

Following on, Members sought assurances in respect of the processes in place to support existing residents where problems arise from new residents in council housing. In response, it was confirmed that problems did occur and tenancy support officers were crucial in providing assistance to residents in such circumstances. More tenancy support officers had been recruited recently and would, following induction and training, be able to do more work on prevention and tenancy periods, both with Members and local communities.

In response to a question in respect of the allocation criteria for people from outside of the borough it was explained that applicants would have to have family resident in the borough or work within the borough for the previous three years. Eligibility was detailed in the local connection criteria of the policy and applicants would not be eligible if they could not demonstrate a local connection. A further explanation of the local connection process was provided to the Board.

Members queried the wording in respect of recommendation (e) of the report and specifically whether the wording around parents overextended the criteria intended and whether there would be other family members that would be included. In response, it was confirmed that the wording implied a close family relative and this had been included on the recommendation of the Improving Places Select Commission.

Members sought assurances in respect of the availability and quality of temporary accommodation and referred to issues in respect of both over the recent Christmas holiday period. In response, it was confirmed that there had been a focus on temporary accommodation, with an increase in the number of crash pads available from 29 to 50. Work was ongoing to ensure the quality of those was to an acceptable standard. Members were reminded that prevention was the key to this particular area of work.

The Chair referred to the absence of an equality impact assessment which the Board considered should have accompanied the report. This issue had been raised on a number of occasions and he indicated that he would raise it again formally at the next Cabinet meeting where the report was due to be considered. In response, the Cabinet Member for Housing accepted the comments made by the Chair and indicated that an initial desktop exercise had been undertaken and a full equality impact assessment would be undertaken and forwarded to the Board in due course.

Resolved:-

That Cabinet be advised that the recommendations be supported, subject to recommendation (e) being amended for the local connection rule to include persons with a close family connection

34. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT – BUSINESS PLAN 2019/20

Consideration was given to a report which was due to be submitted to the Cabinet meeting on 21 January 2019 which provided a detailed technical overview of the current position and the reason for proposed changes to the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan for 2019/20.

It was reported that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) recorded all expenditure and income relating to the provision of council housing and related services. The Council was required to produce a HRA Business Plan setting out its investment priorities over a 30 year period. Following the introduction in 2012 of HRA self-financing, whereby the Council was awarded control over its HRA in return for taking on a proportion of national housing debt, Rotherham's HRA was in a strong position with a healthy level of reserves. A number of policies were introduced by central government that resulted in a reduction to HRA resources, namely:

- 1% per annum reduction in Council rents over four years. 2019-20 in the final year of the policy
- Reinvigoration of the Right to Buy (RTB) (reduction of qualifying period to three years): Reducing stock
- Welfare reform - bedroom tax, universal credit and benefits cap: Impacting on tenants' ability to pay their rent, and increasing the resources required by the Council to collect rent from tenants in receipt of benefits.

Members noted that over the past year, there has been a shift in government policy towards increasing the availability of housing across all tenure types. This had reduced pressures on the business plan, the most significant policy announcement being the return of the previous rent formula from 2020-21 onwards, namely set at Consumer Price Index (CPI) + 1% for five years. The subsequent review of the HRA Business Plan for 2019-20 had focused on achieving the following:

- Contributing to the borough's housing growth target of 900 homes per annum through building and/ or purchasing new properties
- Maintaining and continuing to improve 20,500 Council homes
- Contributing to the development of low cost home ownership products that were needed locally and would play a critical role in Rotherham's overall economic growth
- Continued investment to support the General Fund budget position

Referring to the recent scrutiny review on modern methods of construction and specifically the opportunities presented by modular housing, Members queried why further investment was not planned from the Housing Revenue Account when it could be delivered without further borrowing. In response, the Cabinet Member for Housing explained that £51m had already been agreed, further monies were in the pipeline but had not yet received Cabinet approval.

Members referred to the risks highlighted in respect of repairs and maintenance, where over a five year period it was planned to invest around £99mm with an efficiency saving of £11m over that time. Assurances were sought as to whether a review of how repairs and maintenance was working would be undertaken and what amount of exposure there was to interest rate rises.

In response, it was explained that efficiency savings for repairs and maintenance would contribute to better quality, which would ensure that the authority would not be spending as much as it would have been. Furthermore, the repairs and maintenance contract was out to tender and would contribute to a reduction in spend, realising efficiencies through the new contract. Members noted that 250 properties fall out of decency each year and needed to be attended to.

As with the previous item, the Chair referred to the absence of an equality impact assessment and indicated that this would be expected in future.

Resolved:-

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

35. BUDGET CONSULTATION REPORT 2019-20 & 2020-21

Consideration was given to a briefing paper which outlined the process and feedback received during the consultation on the Council's budget proposals, which was subject to public consultation from 26 October to 30 November 2018.

It was reported that there was a need to inform the public about the necessity of working in a different way and the scale of the challenges faced due to ongoing Government reductions, particularly, the cost of social care, which helped to explain some of the difficult decisions faced by councils like Rotherham. After reviewing budget consultation approaches from other areas, digital channels and social media proved more effective than public consultation events. Therefore a reduced number of face-to-face sessions were held, with the main focus on online engagement through the following channels:

- Online questionnaire
- Social media engagement – Facebook and Twitter
- Short videos of the Leader answering budget related questions
- Web content on Council website

Members noted that a total of 1,181 people participated in the consultation overall, through online engagement, face-to-face sessions, letters and emails.

Following the conclusion of the presentation on the report, Members sought further information on how the consultation process was designed, seeking to understand why questions had been structured in a particular way and whether any difficulties had been encountered in pulling information together for the different methodologies used.

In response, it was explained that previously it had been difficult to analyse open questions and with there not being a large amount of responses or engagement, the process was designed on this occasion to be focus on questions that the Council wanted answers to. There remained opportunities for open ended answers and to talk about specific issues. Having presented savings options, the consultation was decided to elicit responses about the Council's most important services and to get ideas on the savings proposals that had been published. Advice was provided by the Communications and Marketing service to establish what was needed to give a greater response.

Members queried whether the Council had received the data that it had wanted to get in the feedback and indicated that it would have been useful to have received the full feedback received, including comments. In response, it was confirmed that a lot of the feedback from Overview and Scrutiny Management Board on the last year's budget consultation had been used to inform the approach for the current year. A lot more information had been published via the website and a commitment was given to provide further information to Members outside of the meeting. It was acknowledged that the consultation process around the budget would continue to evolve as a learning exercise.

Clarification was sought in respect of how the Council had sought to consult with groups with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. In response, it was considered that there was some learning in how this could be done in future and improving targeted work, but it was more difficult to do this in a consultation process which was not service specific or that mattered to individuals.

Members sought to understand how much the consultation had cost in terms of time and money. In response, it was explained that figure could not be provided, but it was not expected to significant with face to face contact time being limited.

Resolved:-

1. That the feedback on the budget consultation be received.
2. That future budget consultation exercise ensure that protected characteristic groups are targeted more effectively.

36. URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair reported that there were no items of business requiring urgent consideration by the Board.

37. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

Resolved:-

That the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board be held on Wednesday 30 January 2019 at 11.00 a.m. in Rotherham Town Hall.