

An Update from the Chair of Improving Places Select Commission

Together with the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Management Board (OSMB), Cllr Maggi Clark, I have been invited as Chair of Improving Places Select Commission (IPSC), to provide an update in respect of recent outcomes achieved by both overview and scrutiny Committees of the Council.

Overview and Scrutiny Management Board

The Board's recent focus of work has been pre-decision. In February, OSMB considered the Budget proposals and Council Tax for 2023/24; Housing Revenue Account and Housing Rents and Charges. March's agenda considered Climate Change Action Plan and Annual Report; Modern Slavery Annual Transparency Statement; Social Value Annual Report and Fleet Replacement Plan.

In respect of the budget proposals, the Committee maintained a 'big picture' view of the financial pressures affecting the council and provided challenge to how these might impact on existing budgets and budget setting for future years as well as understanding the proposals about prudent levels of reserves. The Board challenged the assumptions underpinning the budget, their alignment to Council Plan themes and proposals for the level of council tax. In particular, Members probed the thinking that lay behind the main savings proposals to establish if these would be of detriment to existing services. For example, during the discussion on Early Help savings, assurances were given that one-off savings could be made without significant impact on the service, with a further commitment given that this would be subject to review.

Areas for additional investment such as Household Waste Recycling Sites, Markets and Customer Services had been considered previously by the Committee as part of pre-decision activity and also subject to in-depth scrutiny work (as detailed later in the report). These contributed to the themes of a cleaner, greener environment, expanding economic opportunity, and one Council approach.

Mindful of pressures on household budgets, in respect of the proposals for housing rent and charges, the Board asked consideration be given to whether additional measures, such as tenancy advice and support, could be introduced to mitigate the impact of rent increases for residents who are particularly vulnerable to changes in rent levels (for example recipients of Personal Independence Payments and Disability Living Allowance for children). The Board also asked that consideration is given to developing a communication strategy, including drop-in sessions, to raise awareness of changes to the district heating charges and support available to households.

It was noted that progress was being made in the delivery of the Climate Change Action Plan – of particular interest to the Board was the engagement of the Youth Cabinet on this priority area, with each of their recommendations from the Children's Commissioner's Takeover Challenge being actioned. Linked to this work were plans to replace fleet vehicles to ensure that these were sustainable and contributed to net-zero targets.

Recommendations from its previous scrutiny of social value activity had also been implemented, with a focus on providing case studies to communicate successes.

Lastly, the Board considered the Modern Slavery Transparency Statement. The recommendations from OSMB's spotlight review will be fed into an action plan to promote inter-agency collaboration.

Improving Places Select Commission

I have also been invited to provide an update on the recent scrutiny work undertaken by the members and co-optees who serve on Improving Places Select Commission (IPSC). The Commission works cross-party to improve the environment for Rotherham residents. This involves closely examining the services and policies that are in place to make the borough a better place to live. The remit of Improving Places spans several themes of the Council Plan 2022-2023 as it works to hold the Council's decision-makers to account for delivering on its objectives. The programme of scrutiny work includes

- examining issues that are important to local communities,
- receiving assurances that people are safer and able to live well by having access to good quality housing,
- ensuring that people have access to libraries and cultural activities,
- that economic opportunity is expanding,
- and that we are working toward a cleaner greener living environment.

Every Neighbourhood Thriving: Working with Communities on things that matter to them and ensuring local people have access to libraries, cultural activities, parks and green spaces.

To help The Council ensure every neighbourhood is thriving in Rotherham, Scrutiny has supported the Council to achieve its objective of working with local communities on the issues that are important to them. The Council has been responsively working with communities on the delivery of the Bereavement Service Contract, which returned for scrutiny in December 2022, with several members of the public taking part in the challenge to decision-makers by asking questions. The outcome led to recommendations for greater communication around how the Council and the contractor are upholding their duties under the Equality Act 2010, and around the five-year maintenance plan. IPSC also had overview of the Thriving Neighbourhoods Annual Report, which showed the Council's progress in delivering objectives associated with the neighbourhood working model. The forward work programme will also include scrutiny around on road safety, a topic suggested by community members through a recent petition.

Response was received from Cabinet regarding a previous spotlight review of the Cultural Strategy, which sought to ensure local people have access to libraries, cultural activities, parks and green spaces. The review sought assurances that barriers were addressed so that families who may have experienced isolation and financial changes as a result of the pandemic could access cultural events near where they live. In response to the recommendations, the range of activities tailored for young people

has been expanded with young people from low-income communities a priority. The expanded range of activities includes swimming and water safety programmes across the borough, in response to increased popularity of wild swimming. The new events programme will ensure that a variety of activities are delivered in a range of locations including specialist culture and leisure venues as well as community settings. The Leisure Team are working with colleagues in Children and Young People's Services and other partners on the Cultural Partnership Board to explore the feasibility of a wider scheme of access to leisure centres for young carers which could be rolled out in readiness for the summer holidays.

People are Safe, Healthy and Live Well: People have access to good quality housing

IPSC seeks regular assurances that services are working to keep people safe and that people are able to live well by having access to good quality housing. IPSC has just completed a review of the impact of Selective Licensing in the borough which facilitates a scheme of inspections to raise housing standards within the private rented sector by addressing potential hazards and reducing organised crime. The forthcoming report on the findings of the review, to be received by IPSC on 9 May 2023, will provide an assessment of the effectiveness of the scheme at its halfway point and issue recommendations to help maximise effectiveness going forward.

IPSC recently made recommendations with a view to clarifying the placement and maintenance programme for defibrillators located in Council-owned buildings, ensuring life-saving equipment is ready to use in an emergency.

IPSC scrutinised the response of the Housing Repairs and Maintenance Service to a review by the Rotherfed Tenant Scrutiny Panel in 2021, recommending that the Service re-enforce communication to show how feedback from tenants is heard implemented, using a "You said, We did" approach. Scrutiny found that the Service is close to achieving the target 97% of repairs done "right first time."

Following on from the previous Rotherfed tenant scrutiny review in 2020, IPSC continued its dialogue with the Aids and Adaptations Service, which empowers people to live independently in their homes for as long as they can. Future scrutiny will monitor and the ongoing progress of the Service in autumn 2023 regarding backlog clearance. A vital link in releasing hospital capacity and delaying entry to social care, this Service is expected to grow in demand over time. Future scrutiny will seek assurances that the Service has capacity to respond to the changing needs of residents.

IPSC undertook further work on the theme of improving communications with tenants. Councillors fed into a draft tenant engagement framework at an early stage. IPSC also scrutinised the response to the latest Rotherfed Tenant Scrutiny Panel Review, which focussed on communications. IPSC also had overview of progress in implementation of the Housing Strategy and Housing Development Programme. I would like to thank Rotherham Federation of Communities and the two co-opted members of IPSC for strengthening the representation of the Council's partnership with Rotherfed in improving services and policies that improve living environment for Rotherham residents and ensuring the voices of tenants are heard.

IPSC scrutinised the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy, making recommendations that early intervention and prevention be prioritised within the updated strategy, and that the strategy revision be expedited. As a result, the revised strategy, emphasising early intervention and prevention, was submitted to Cabinet on 20 March 2023. IPSC members noted that, in response to scrutiny recommendations in 2021 around sustainability of the Service, staff posts that were previously temporary were made permanent. This meant that the Service had been able to retain skilled and experienced staff and has been in a stronger position to respond to the impact of the pandemic and rising costs of living on community members at risk of homelessness.

Expanding Economic Opportunity:

IPSC has had continued overview of the implementation of the range of interventions associated with the Town Centre Masterplan. An area of regeneration in the Town Centre which became a focus of a review was Markets. Councillors sought assurances that following the pandemic the Markets were being supported to recover from the pandemic and that the plans for redevelopment would continue to grow economic opportunity for Rotherham Residents. The Cabinet's response to the recommendations has shown the Service is at work engaging with stakeholders to make the redesigned Markets as welcoming as possible to traders and shoppers alike.

In IPSC's early 2022 findings from its spotlight on external funding, the development team were commended for their ambition to maximise the impact of external funding. A further outcome of the spotlight was that ISPC's findings from its review of markets were fed back to the development team to aid in formulating future bids which included markets. The recent news of Rotherham's successful levelling up bid for £20 million is a testament to the hard work and tenacity of the Service.

Previous scrutiny of the Indicative Programme of Highways and Roads Maintenance has led to continuation of councillor-suggested roads being included in the 2023/34 Highway Repair Programme. If the required funding becomes available, the Service will seek to provide Members with the opportunity to nominate footways to be included in the Highway Repair Programme. Further, regular communication around multihog schedules has been reinstated, and ward councillors and Neighbourhoods Teams have a direct line to highway inspector contacts. Councillors were also invited to a site meeting and included in an ongoing trial of new materials to repair footways around mature trees on Toll Boar Road, Swinton.

A Cleaner Greener Local Environment:

Over the last 18 months, scrutiny has held decision-makers to account regarding the Council's response to the Environment Act 2021, especially as regards the local approach to household waste recycling and improvements to the biodiversity in the natural environment. Another change ushered in by the new legislation involves the Council's duty to improve the natural environment by 10% by November 2023.

The Council resolved in May 2022 to declare a nature crisis in Rotherham. In support of this declaration, scrutiny has agreed to undertake a review of the state of biodiversity in Rotherham. The review will consider strategic approaches already in place and

propose any additional interventions that can help the Council achieve its nature recovery targets.

Recently, IPSC has commented on the Draft Enviro-Crime Plan at an early phase to shape how the Council approaches enforcement, prevention, and education around environmental offenses. Following an in-depth look at fly-tipping, recommendations were made to help prevent contaminated bins, accept vans at household waste recycling centres, and facilitate community skips. IPSC agreed that litter picking volunteers should be recognised in a special way, as their contribution makes a huge difference in beautification of the borough. IPSC will continue to monitor the Council's response to the Environment Bill 2021 and the pilot scheme bringing the customer interface of household waste recycling under the administration of the Council.

IPSC continues to have overview of Flood Alleviation works as well as the Self-management of Allotments through strong partnership links with the Rotherham Allotments Alliance. Actions taken in response to an internal review of the Tree Programme will also be considered for scrutiny in May 2023. IPSC will continue to have overview of these areas as they contribute to the Council's Climate Action agenda and their role in promoting biodiversity.

Overview and Scrutiny in Rotherham has accomplished much within the past several months to support delivery of the Council's objectives in relation to economic opportunity, safety, quality housing, and a cleaner environment. These efforts seek to make Rotherham a better place to live for all residents. Overview and Scrutiny has held decisionmakers to account and worked to ensure services and policies are responsive to the needs of Rotherham residents in a fast-changing world.

Cllr Ken Wyatt

Chair of Improving Places Select Commission