

Partners' Views on Council Progress: Evidence for Commissioners' 30 months Report

Summary

In preparation for the 30 month August progress report to DCLG, The Commissioner team interviewed local partners for an external review of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council's progress since last year.

Background

In February 2016, the Commissioner team visited partners to gauge their views on Council improvement, one year after the intervention commenced in Rotherham. This formed part of the evidence for the 12 month report to the Secretaries of State for Communities and Local Government, and Education. Both departments found the report helpful as it was a good way of getting further external validation of the Council.

In July 2017, the Commissioners' team returned to interview the same partners who were seen last year (and another who joined shortly after the review in 2016). This report highlights some of the key points and issues to come out of the interviews. During the interviews, partners were told that their answers will remain anonymous and any quotes will not be attributed to them. Records of each interview are kept in the Commissioner files.

Relationships with the Council

Partners noted further improvements in their partnership with the Council since the last round of interviews. Interviewees spoke of 'transparent', 'strong' and 'productive' relationships.

At political level, all partners spoke positively of the leader and they generally had good working relationships with Cabinet members. One interviewee said there is 'aligned thinking and decision-making is citizen focused.' Another talked of good levels of understanding of the key issues. However, one participant observed that some elected members became too involved at operational level.

Interviewees were positive towards the Council's senior leadership team, feeling they were kept up-to-date with emerging issues with a view that the Council saw their organisations as credible partners and progress was being made 'at significant pace'. The chief executive was universally supported for her approach and desire to build relationships. All partners agreed that their organisation had a 'good'/'strong'/'mature' relationship with the Council's senior team.

When asked about management and operational levels, views became rather mixed. One interviewee questioned whether the culture shift at senior grades was replicated at other levels, with comments of disconnect between tiers of the Council. Others mentioned there is good engagement but still a way to go, with one interviewee commenting that employees still do not understand how their decisions can impact on other organisations and communities.

Good practice

Examples of good working practice included the recent work around Eastwood, the town centre masterplan and the future locality working model. The latter was mentioned by almost every participant with all agreeing this was a positive step forward and would enhance partnership working. Other examples included the launch of the Compact, joint initiatives around health care and the Council consulting more than previously; it is now far easier to contact senior officers than before. There is a better sense of what the Council is trying to achieve.

Behaviour of the Council

Almost all the interviews could not recall any poor or inappropriate behaviour by either officers or Elected Members over the last 12 months. One interviewee commented on a particular case regarding an elected member sentenced in December 2016 for sexual assault, and was impressed in the way the Labour Group dealt with the matter.

Public Perception of the Council

There were a number of different views from partners, although at least half of the responders felt the public were experiencing a more open and transparent Council. One interviewee thought people in the borough had changed from feeling negative to neutral. Another thought the public are more confident that the Council is making progress. Other comments included a Council embracing change and that as an organisation it cannot be expected to do everything on its own.

Participants were asked about public perception of the borough's response to child sexual exploitation. There were different views on this. One interviewee thought the public view this as number one priority, and they would like to see Council officials held to account for the actions of the past. The same interviewee added that the public are being reassured by the number of perpetrators being brought to justice, echoed by other participants. However, two other partners noted that CSE is no longer the first point raised by members of the public, whilst one commented that there is a feeling that children are now safer in Rotherham.

Rotherham Together Partnership

There were a variety of comments regarding the Council's involvement in the partnership. The Council leader was singled out as doing an 'excellent' job of chairing the partnership, and interviewees were impressed by his promotion of the Rotherham plan at the official launch earlier this year. Other comments included the Council's role in the partnership being at the right balance and relationships are good and getting better.

Interviewees also reflected on the partnership's continuous improvement in the last 12 months: 'confident, open-minded and now with equal partner status.' Interviewees talked of open relationships with partners fully engaged and able to constructively challenge and debate. Governance is sound with clarity between and within the various boards across Rotherham Together Partnership.

A number of interviewees expect the partnership to move from plan to delivery in the next 12 months, with two mentioning the importance of getting the branding right. Another talked of a partnership expecting to put a package together to attract inward investment.

The Future

Interviewees expect the Council's trajectory to continue upwards and the prospects look good. However, they also mentioned some of the challenges they will face: community safety and particularly domestic abuse; community cohesion; involving partners to play an even bigger role in the partnership.

One participant thought the Council's scrutiny on business was more than is required, whilst another wanted more engagement with big businesses and other agencies in the borough. The devolution deal is likely to have an impact on the Council.

Suggestions for the Council included: conducting a local exercise in 12 months that measures public perception of progress in Rotherham; more proactive in data sharing with partners; aligning budgets and pooling of resources with partners; a goal of improving the brand of Rotherham, and making sure MPs are regularly briefed and sighted on progress.

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