

Appendix – Report of the Independent Health Check

Lead Commissioner Mary Ney
Rotherham MBC
Riverside House
Main Street
Rotherham
S60 1AE

Sent by email

12 March 2018

Dear Commissioners Ney, Kenny and Bradwell

Independent Health Check

I am writing on behalf of the health check team to report the outcome of our review that took place in Rotherham from 27 February to 2 March 2018.

As planned, the team comprised Irene Lucas, Cllr Imogen Walker, Sally Hammond, Judith Hurcombe and me.

You asked the team to provide an independent critique as to whether the Rotherham intervention had served its purpose and the Council is fit to continue its improvement journey without Commissioner oversight. The terms of reference, which are attached as an appendix, required us to give assurance in relation to ten themes, which we set out and comment on throughout this letter.

The standard sought for assurance was not for the Council to have achieved wide ranging excellence or even best practice, but to be able to demonstrate that it was sufficiently self-aware and tenaciously committed to continuous improvement without the oversight of Commissioners. Also we were asked to provide reassurance that the overseeing role of Commissioners can be withdrawn without detriment to the Council's best value duty.

As part of the health check the team met with a very wide range of local and regional stakeholders and partners, including those who work in health, policing and community safety, business, education, housing and the voluntary and community sector. In addition we met with many Rotherham councillors, the leadership team, front-line staff and middle management officers.

We would like to thank the Commissioners, the Council and all the people we met for their helpful, frank and enthusiastic engagement in the review.

Summary

Rotherham MBC has demonstrated to the review team that it is presently fit to continue its improvement journey without Commissioner oversight. It understands that it has a great deal still to do to modernise and bring up to a good standard all its functions and services but it is meeting its legal duty to secure continuous improvement in the way it exercises its functions. The Council's governance, decision-making and organisational culture are being transformed and are already much improved. The speed and extent of the improvements delivered since 2015 are impressive.

While the next stage of the Council's improvement journey will prove challenging, we are confident that the right foundations for continuous improvement are in place and sufficiently strong. We experienced a Council that has shifted from denial about its failures to collective and personal ownership of problems and challenges. We saw a developing culture of accountability, honesty, transparency, openness and engagement. We heard that leadership and management are effective, working well together and are highly regarded by partners, staff and stakeholders. There is a shared vision for the Borough and the Council and many examples of excellent partnership working.

We set out below further information about these matters and address all our terms of reference themes.

Political leadership

Reviewed: The competence of the Council's political leadership to promote the vision for the borough, to have the confidence of stakeholders and to work effectively with officers

There is a high degree of assurance about the Council's current political leadership. Over half the Council's elected members are relatively new to the role. Partners and staff told us that the style of the Council's political leadership has been transformed and that it is now far more open, inclusive and engaged than ever before. All the stakeholders and partners we spoke to told us that Rotherham's senior elected members now demonstrate clarity of purpose and transparent decision-making. Committee reports are much improved with clear options appraisal, so enabling increased accountability.

We heard about examples of outstanding partnership working locally and regionally where elected members are taking an active and positive role in initiating and developing productive relationships. The many elected members we spoke to demonstrated their suitability for the role and a good understanding about their local communities. Cabinet Members demonstrated high levels of capability and it is clear that they have a good grasp of the issues relevant to their portfolio responsibilities.

Every partner and stakeholder that we spoke to highlighted that the new Leader is demonstrating effective leadership characterised by positivity and inclusivity, which is welcome. The Leader stepped into a difficult role. He has stepped up to the challenge and grown into the role to the extent that he can now be considered a strong role model for modern values-driven political leadership. Partners told us that he consistently engages personally and in formal settings with effectiveness and with an appropriate blend of humility and confidence.

Officer leadership

Reviewed: The competence of the Council's officer leadership to operate corporately and work effectively with Members

There is a high degree of assurance about the officer leadership. We received consistent feedback that the present Chief Executive and the Council's most senior managers are highly regarded. We heard many examples of senior leaders not only recognising issues but of them being prepared to roll up their sleeves and get involved in sorting out problems and addressing challenges. There is clear evidence of determination, tenacity and an energetic can-do attitude.

Leadership overall

Rotherham's senior political and officer leaders and managers have made significant progress and the pace of change is impressive. Lines of accountability are clearer, governance arrangements are stronger, working relationships within and beyond the Council have been radically improved. The Leadership is beginning to break down old-fashioned 'silo working' and together the Council's leaders relentlessly focus on making a positive difference to the lives of the people of Rotherham. The relationship between the political leadership and managerial leadership is good and appropriately conducted.

There is recognition that much of the recent success is being achieved because of the higher visibility of the Leader and Chief Executive and other senior councillors and officers. The Chief Executive and Leader regularly go out and about across the Borough to meet all levels of staff and a wide range of partners and stakeholders. The consistent messages they are delivering and the positive behaviours and personal commitment they are demonstrating are having exceptional impacts. The Leadership is striking the right balance in terms of acknowledging the past and looking forward. People talked about being inspired by the Leader and Chief Executive and this has helped to inspire confidence in the improvement journey that Rotherham Council is on.

Strategic direction

Reviewed: Sufficiency of clarity about strategic direction and priorities that are becoming widely understood

There is a high degree of assurance about the Council's strategic direction. The *Rotherham Together Partnership Plan* sets out a clear and shared vision for the Borough which links appropriately with the *Council Plan*. The Council has from the beginning of developing new Borough-wide and Council strategies and plans worked well with local partners. As a result local partners feel engaged in Rotherham's improvement journey and understand their roles in contributing to it. There is evidence of the Council not only welcoming and embracing the contributions of local partners and stakeholders, but of the Council actively seeking out, listening to and respecting the input of others. This has led to a high degree of ownership and deep understanding of the strategies and plans that the Borough and regional partners are working on together. Moreover partners are evidently taking the necessary steps to achieve Rotherham's ambitions and the Borough vision. Plans are being translated into focused action with a view to achieving outcomes and impact where it matters most. The phases of implementation reflect the agreed priorities.

Partner engagement

Reviewed: Engagement with key partners, the quality of partnership working and the Council's leadership role

There is a high degree of assurance about the Council's engagement with partners and stakeholders. Partner feedback across a range of sectors was consistently positive about the Council's ability now to listen and work jointly. In some instances the feedback was glowing. While the overarching Rotherham Together Partnership is still maturing there was evidence that the 'One Rotherham' approach it is promoting is real and productive. Crucially partners said that the improvement in joint working was evident not only among senior level officers but this was also extending increasingly to middle management and front-line staff. We were given examples of partner agencies actively working together and with the Council to deliver better outcomes for Rotherham's residents. There is clearly the potential for this to develop much further but the prospects are good.

We also saw good examples of cross-boundary working. The Council Leader is Chair of the Sheffield City Region and through this role he is making a significant contribution to the wider area. Regional cooperation across a range of initiatives and developments is bringing direct benefits to Rotherham. This is especially evident in relation to driving economic development, enhancing residents' skills and increasing opportunities for social mobility.

There is widespread engagement and involvement with Rotherham's vigorous voluntary and community sector, which is enthusiastic about future partnership

opportunities. Relationships are characterised by mutual respect. Access to and involvement of appropriate officers is facilitated so that decisions can be taken and issues addressed quickly.

The team's attention was drawn to the crucial role of the Council, working with partners, in managing the impact on residents of the welfare benefit and other changes due to come on stream in the summer. We understand that the Council is currently developing its plans to address these issues. Also we understand that it has been discussing how it might mitigate the risks it has so far identified. But there is an appetite among some partners for the Council to show even stronger leadership and ensure that all the Council's departments are talking to each other about these matters. In particular some partners wish to see better cross-sector preparedness in taking action that will help mitigate the risks of rising debts and homelessness among vulnerable residents.

Partners in this sector were very complimentary about the dramatic and rapid change that has taken place during the last three years in the Council's engagement with them. Some were keen nonetheless to suggest that, if the Commissioners' oversight is removed, the Council should consider undertaking a further independent or validated review in 12 months' time to help provide reassurance that the current momentum, high standards and improvement trajectory are maintained.

Resident and stakeholder engagement

Reviewed: *Engagement with residents and stakeholders, building community cohesion*

Assurance can be provided in relation to this theme. Following the publication of Professor Alexis Jay's 2014 *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham* and the 2015 *Report of Inspection* by Louise Casey and the consequent arrival of the Commissioners, the Council has worked hard with the Commissioners to earn and rebuild the trust of residents and local communities. The healing process from the shocking revelations of past failures is not yet complete. The memories of reputational damage will no doubt linger for some time yet. But many local people have seen for themselves the radical turn-around in approach and impact that the Council and Commissioners have already achieved and that the Council is continuing to achieve. Trust is being earned and increasingly people recognise that the Council is trying to do the right things. The Council regularly undertakes resident surveys and these show resident satisfaction and trust in the Council rising. The Council considers carefully the findings from such surveys and consultation feedback. Ward councillors are engaging with their communities and the extent and depth of that engagement is continuing to improve. Ward walks and better data analysis for each ward are helping ward councillors and those who support them to learn from best practice, work together more and address local issues and challenges more effectively. Good

support to ward councillors is being put in place and further improvement to strengthen and focus that support is in development.

Building Stronger Communities shows early signs of promise. Some communities feel isolated at times and bringing communities together is a complex area of work that takes time and needs constant attention. But the neighbourhood focus being promoted by the Council and its commitment to listening to residents, engaging meaningfully and addressing concerns is helping to improve the prospects for success.

Financial capacity and resolve

Reviewed: Capacity and resolve to deliver financial stability and financial discipline

Assurance can be provided in relation to this theme. Rotherham MBC is not alone in facing significant financial pressure. We are confident that elected members understand the scale and nature of the financial challenge facing the Council. We also are confident that there is the political will to take the necessary difficult decisions. We were encouraged too that due to the inclusive style of the leadership, backbench members are aware of the issues.

We are confident in the senior managerial capacity and resolve to face the difficulties ahead and to seek to deliver financial stability and financial discipline. However, the political and managerial leadership will be seriously tested over the coming financial years. Achieving the Council's 2018/19 revenue budget will be a substantial challenge, and the development of a medium term financial strategy (MTFS) remains work in progress. Good work has been done to shift budgeting away from 'silo-based' working to thematic budgeting directly linked to the Council's priorities.

For the Council to be well placed to achieve its financial objectives elected members and senior managers need as a matter of urgency to be assured that robust plans are in place for Adult Social Care and Children's Services. These plans need to be detailed and clear as to the impact they will have, the projected savings they will achieve and the key milestones for phased delivery. These plans should be monitored and reviewed closely and regularly.

The Council is continuing to explore how the organisation can best be organised to more efficiently and effectively deliver its strategies and plans. It is also developing a strategic workforce plan that will entail the systematic re-design of its services and associated staffing structures in line with the Council's stated priorities and ambitions. The reviews will deliver a future council that is 'smaller in size but bigger in influence'. We endorse the measured, phased and tailored approach being taken. This work will be an essential element to ensuring that the Council can operate within its available resources and achieve financial resilience.

The next iteration of the Council's MTFS should link together the financial implications of key partnership, Council and service plans, and the Council's future operating model and strategic workforce plan.

Risk management

Reviewed: Capacity and resolve to identify and manage risk, and to deal with new demands, turbulence, challenges, services weaknesses and failures, media attention and reputational risks

Assurance can be provided in relation to this theme. The open and transparent approach being promoted by the Council's political and managerial leadership provides a healthy context within which the many risks and challenges that the Council faces can be recognised and managed appropriately.

Senior managers and elected members focus effectively on identifying and managing risk. In addition the Audit Committee contributes confidently to ensuring that risks are properly considered and managed. The approach taken by the Audit Committee is well developed. The Committee emphasises realism and full transparency in risk-management and could be considered an exemplar in this regard. In the previous paragraphs we have drawn attention to the need to identify more accurately and manage more robustly the Council's budget delivery risks.

Scrutiny in Rotherham is active and it benefits from good engagement from elected members who are supported well in their scrutiny role. There is evidence of effective cross-party working for important agendas and decisions, representing a significant improvement when compared to earlier years. Information is readily available to members undertaking scrutiny.

All councils face media attention and reputational risks but Rotherham's recent history makes this especially challenging. Following acceptance of advice from Commissioners and recent recruitment of fresh capability, the communications team is increasingly confident in its role, and we heard evidence that it is now very well-regarded by partners.

Organisational culture and performance management

Reviewed: A positive and healthy organisational culture and attention to performance management

Organisational culture

There is a high degree of assurance in the direction of travel for this theme. One partner described the Council's current organisational culture as '*unrecognisable*' when comparing the ways of working across the Council to how it operated a few

years ago. Other partners, stakeholders and Rotherham councillors and officers echoed this sentiment. The Council, working collaboratively with Commissioners and independently in more recent times has achieved a great deal in a remarkably short space of time given the level of change that needed to be achieved.

Radically increasing the visibility of the Leader and Chief Executive and other members of the Council's senior political and managerial teams is clearly a crucial factor in enabling the Council to reinvent how it operates and works with others. Staff are now accustomed to frequently seeing councillors in the main Riverside council building and out in their communities.

Increasingly staff feel more valued. They appreciate the roadshows and briefings that they can attend with the Chief Executive and Leader. They also appreciate the more regular opportunities they have to engage with senior managers. Many members of staff are increasingly developing their confidence to interact with the senior management team and raise issues and questions with them. Staff are far more likely now to feel that managers will listen to and act on their ideas for improvement and to appropriately take account of their views. Pride in working for the Council is gradually returning, meaning they are increasingly ready to act as advocates for their employer and the Borough. This is in the context of a legacy of reputational matters that are continuing to impact on staff and councillors. Unsurprisingly perhaps, staff and councillors still have to deal with sensitive and negative responses from the public. They are doing so for the most part with dignity, humility and resilience.

The position is not consistent across all directorates. There are some dissenting voices and pockets of discontent, as one might expect in the prevailing context of rapid change in very challenging circumstances. Work is in progress to address this and extend the reach of new ways of working. The issues and risks evident in recent staff survey results are well understood by senior staff and are also being thoughtfully addressed.

Phased work is under way, too, to refresh and modernise the Council's Human Resources policies and practice in ways that are helping to strengthen middle management and other officer accountability.

Managing performance

We are assured that the Council is improving its performance management approach. Good progress to date relates to the Council promoting an outcome-based approach and developing better and more useful performance indicators and measures than it had before, including for partnership working.

It is helpful that the Council has ensured that Cabinet Members, Scrutiny Members and officers are aware of the performance management arrangements. Pre-decision Scrutiny is developing well, although the Council may wish to monitor activity to ensure that Scrutiny Members' emphasis on scrutinising at the stages of policy

development and service design does not take too much capacity from Scrutiny's vital role in challenging the delivery of performance improvement.

We found good examples of members and officers challenging each other appropriately in purposeful and useful ways on a regular basis. We also are aware that the Council is increasingly benchmarking its own performance and costs against other local authorities to identify sources of learning and self-challenge.

However, this is work in progress and more detailed work needs to be done before the Council is able to consistently demonstrate and fully embed an effective and integrated performance management framework for all its functions.

In particular, the combined understanding of performance and cost requires greater analysis and is improving from a low base. The Council is not yet always bringing together its information about performance, costs and achievement of savings. These are reported in different places and this is not helping elected members and staff to gain a comprehensive understanding about the interaction between these elements.

Current reporting cycles and the analysis of data are not consistently enabling the rapid identification of cost pressures and demand variations in front-line services, including for Adult Social Care and Children's Services. Further work is needed to ensure that the Council is able to more quickly identify such pressures and mitigating action.

It is also important that the Council continues to develop its approach to holding colleagues to account, in collegiate ways, for the identification and delivery of agreed savings. The senior management team and the Cabinet need to continue to fully embed a strong 'trust model', as advocated by Commissioners. This will entail colleagues truly reflecting the Council's priorities in any budget proposals they put forward.

Sustainability

Reviewed: *Prospects for the sustainability and continuity of competent leadership*

Assurance can be provided in relation to this theme. We were impressed with the quality of the Council's current Cabinet Members. We are also confident that there is talent on the Council that can be further developed for the future. Over recent years elected member development, induction and mentoring programmes have been widely taken up and well received. These have proved helpful in driving the vital improvements in how the Council engages and makes decisions. It is important that such programmes continue to be offered and delivered to a high standard in order to further develop and assure strong Member capability. Given the speed and scale of the changes over recent years, the Council recognises that it now needs to find

ways to enable some stability and continuity while also addressing significant new challenges and continuing to implement large-scale change.

Among the most impressive aspects of the Council's improvement journey has been members' openness to learning from and being supported by others. This has been one of the keys to its success to date. Numerous members have sought out and enthusiastically embraced opportunities to learn from other organisations. Some Councillors have been on many useful visits to other Councils and have returned with new ideas that they have adapted and put into practice. Maintaining an appetite for learning and seeking out support will be crucial for the Council's continuing improvement journey and should continue to be encouraged and facilitated.

The Council has strong strategic managerial leadership and is well placed to be able to cope with changes in the top team, should these occur. The Council now places a strong emphasis on learning and leadership development. It is, for example, exploring how to further develop cross-sector management development programmes with partners. Such programmes will contribute to managerial confidence and improve resilience below the top team.

There was, however, concern expressed by partners and staff about the extent of interim managerial roles at senior levels and the risk to continuity and stability that this brings. The Council recognises that as it moves forward on its improvement journey it will need to continue to make permanent high-quality appointments as quickly as possible.

Adult social care and domestic abuse

Reviewed: Assurance of improved Council capability in relation to adult social care and domestic abuse, in preparedness for the removal of additional measures of Commissioners' formal advice set out in revised Directions on 12th September

Adult social care

Far-reaching changes are needed to bring Rotherham's adult social care service in line and up to date with what has been regarded as good practice for a considerable time. The scale of the modernisation needed will take many years to fully implement, perhaps up to five years.

We are assured of the Council's improved capability in relation to adult social care and its preparedness to take forward its improvement agenda without ongoing Commissioner advice. But we do have some reservations, which we outline below.

We are assured that the Council has the benefit of strong political and managerial leadership for adult social care. Lead Members and Executive Directors are taking lead roles in these services and this coordinated leadership is impressive. They have

a strong intellectual understanding about adult social care and they have been proactive in finding out what is happening on the ground. The Executive Director has earned the respect of members, staff and partners in a short space of time. We probed councillors' resolve to make what may prove to be difficult and locally unpopular decisions in order to modernise the adult social care service from the traditional and inappropriate one it is today. We are confident that they have the determination and appetite to make the necessary changes.

Senior officers involved in driving the necessary modernisation programmes are clear about their priorities and they have shared these with elected members and partners. But the Council does not yet have a clear, positive and compelling narrative that describes the extent and type of the transformation needed. Crucially the Council has not yet set out how modernisation will deliver positive impacts and improvements to the quality of people's lives. The Council needs to develop and share widely this narrative urgently and it should bring it to life with case studies to illustrate how the changes will positively affect the lives of service users and those who support them. Currently the Council is placing too much emphasis on how the changes will deliver savings. The savings will come, but these will be a by-product of bringing the service in line with current thinking and up-to-date good practice.

The Council is still getting a grip with fully understanding what is driving its demands and costs. It needs to further mature its analysis and develop robust and measurable plans for delivery. These should set out clearly what will be done, by whom, when and how to implement the changes needed. Crucially these plans should bring together the Council's cost and performance analyses and explain clearly to all involved how these relate to each other. This should help to enable integrated tracking of all the desired and actual impacts of change.

Capacity and permanent vacancy issues at the assistant director level and other staffing levels also need to be addressed.

Domestic abuse

For Rotherham's work to date on Domestic Abuse there is a high degree of assurance. The intervention team began giving this agenda focused attention a year ago. With the help of the Commissioners initially and the support of peers the Council and its partners have made significant progress and achieved a great deal of improvement at an impressive pace. Partners, elected members and staff express confidence in the recently recruited specialist officer and his contribution to this programme. The prospects for the momentum being maintained and outcomes continuing to be delivered are promising.

Some of the work of the Adult Safeguarding Board and the Domestic Abuse Priority Group is outstanding. Excellent partnership working has been established with the Clinical Commissioning Group and the Police under the Safer Rotherham Partnership. There are real examples of best practice with the Council and Clinical Commissioning Group in relation to involvement and training of General

Practitioners (GPs). All 31 main GPs signed up to involvement. There is also good working going on regionally and with Rotherham and the third sector locally, notably the cross-sector work with perpetrators of domestic violence. There are examples of the Council responding well to partners, such as a willingness to adapt for use by Accident and Emergency staff the format of a form for easier reporting of Domestic Abuse Stalking and Harassment.

Review conclusion

The health check team is satisfied that Rotherham MBC is able to continue its improvement journey without Commissioner oversight. The Council was able to demonstrate that it is sufficiently self-aware and would continue to be tenaciously committed to continuous improvement without the presence of Commissioners. The political and managerial leadership of the Council were able to demonstrate their understanding of their roles, including in ensuring that the children of Rotherham are kept safe and thrive. This is evidenced in a recent Ofsted report. We are satisfied that the overseeing role of Commissioners can be withdrawn without detriment to the Council's best value duty.

We understand that Commissioners will wish to have regard to the findings of the health check team in determining the final phase of their oversight, particularly in relation to Adult Social Care and the need for the Council to further improve its performance management and strengthen its financial resilience.

Beyond the specific terms of reference we were given, the team wishes to express how impressed it is with the rapid progress that Rotherham MBC has made. The Commissioners brought a depth of experience, clarity and confidence to Rotherham's improvement journey that was very much needed. Their extensive contributions and oversight have shaped and driven the change agendas and enabled the rapid and sustainable improvements that are now evident.

The Council has enthusiastically embraced and constructively utilised the assistance and support provided to it by the Commissioners, peers, partners and others. The present senior political and managerial leaders have taken a mature and thoughtful approach. They have used the intervention and past criticisms, however unwelcome, as powerful catalysts and levers for change. By capably drawing the benefits from such opportunities, owning the problems and fully committing to an energetic, rigorous, thorough and systematic approach to delivering continuous improvement and better outcomes, the prospects for Rotherham have been turned around. Learning is being translated into action, promises are being followed through and kept, commitments to honesty and openness are being genuinely delivered. This is all to the benefit of Rotherham's residents.

None of this has been easy. The progress to date is the result of intensive and hard work by the Commissioners and the Council.

Having achieved a firmer grip on its performance in many priority services the Council is now ambitious for its area and region. It is also being realistic about the type and standards of provision it can maintain, given the context of local government generally and Rotherham MBC's financial position in particular.

The Council still has much to do in a challenging and complex context. Maintaining a balanced approach and continuing to focus relentlessly on its strategic priorities while putting at the centre of all it does the needs of its communities will be key to it keeping on track and achieving continued success.

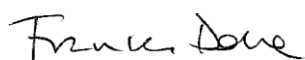
We agree with the partners and a stakeholder who suggested that the Council should consider undertaking a further independent review or validated self-assessment, perhaps in 12-18 months. This would help provide reassurance about the sustainability of the improvements achieved to date and the next phase of the Council's improvement journey.

Meanwhile, the Local Government Association will continue to work with the Council including to provide mentors for key roles, signpost best practice and offer support and advice as appropriate.

The review team believes that important lessons could be learned from this intervention for councils more generally and it would be helpful for this learning to be evaluated and shared widely in due course.

We wish the Council, its partners and residents the very best for the future.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frances Done". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Frances Done FCA CBE

Appendix

Rotherham MBC – Independent Health Check

Background

The imposition of Government Commissioners in February 2015 followed an inspection of corporate governance in the wake of major failings in delivering best value and in tackling Child Sexual Exploitation over more than a decade by the Council but also other partners and specifically South Yorkshire Police. DfE had put in place a Children’s Commissioner in October 2014 following an Ofsted Inspection and this role also became part of the Commissioner Team from February 2015.

The Secretary of State’s Directions removed decision-making powers from Councillors in relation to all executive functions, licensing, the appointment of statutory officers, and Member allowances. They put in place Commissioners for up to four years with a remit to tackle failings but also to restore democratic accountability as soon as possible.

The Council has progressively had its powers restored in phases since February 2016. From September 2017, it is now responsible for all decision-making with the exception of Children’s Social Care, the appointment of statutory officers and Members allowances. Commissioners have the ‘power to direct’ in relation to Adult Social Care and Domestic Abuse and general oversight of all other matters.

Independent Health Check

As part of the final phase of withdrawal it has always been expected that an independent health check would be undertaken. This is not a peer review in the usual sense but an independent critique that the intervention has served its purpose and that the Council is fit to continue its improvement journey without Commissioner oversight.

The health check will take place between 27th February and 2nd March 2018 in the context that the Commissioners and the SoS have determined that the Council is fit to resume democratic responsibility with Commissioner oversight. It is expected that Ofsted will undertake an inspection of Children’s Social Care in late 2017 which will lead to a view on restoration of decision-making powers on children’s social care.

The health check therefore needs to give reassurance on this position and that the overseeing role of Commissioners can be withdrawn without detriment to the Council’s best value duty. If the health check does not form this view it should comment on the issues that require further attention.

The health check should therefore examine and comment on:

- The competence of the Council's political leadership to promote the vision for the borough, to have the confidence of stakeholders and to work effectively with officers;
- The competence of the Council's officer leadership to operate corporately and work effectively with Members;
- Sufficiency of clarity about strategic direction and priorities which are becoming widely understood;
- Engagement with key partners, the quality of partnership working and the Council's leadership role;
- Engagement with residents and stakeholders, building community cohesion;
- Capacity and resolve to deliver financial stability and financial discipline;
- Capacity and resolve to identify and manage risk, and to deal with new demands, turbulence, challenges, services weaknesses and failures, media attention and reputational risks;
- A positive and healthy organisational culture and attention to performance management;
- Prospects for the sustainability and continuity of competent leadership.
- Assurance of improved Council capability in relation to adult social care and domestic abuse, in preparedness for the removal of additional measures of Commissioners' formal advice set out in revised Directions on 12th September.

The standard being sought is not for the Council to have achieved wide ranging excellence or even best practice, but to be self-aware and tenaciously committed to continuous improvement without the oversight of Commissioners. In particular, the political and managerial leadership of the Council need to demonstrate their commitment and understanding of their roles in ensuring that the children of Rotherham are kept safe and thrive.

Team and Methodology

It is proposed that the health check is undertaken by a small team not previously involved with the Council and comprises:

- Team Lead with experience of Interventions (Frances Done)
- Experienced Chief Executive (Irene Lucas)
- Experienced Council Leader (Cllr Imogen Walker)
- Senior advisors (Judith Hurcombe* and Sally Hammond)

*Judith works on the Council's improvement in her capacity as LGA advisor and the team will be able to draw on her experience for the health check.

The approach will include:

- The Commissioner Team providing a brief written overview and assessment of the Council's preparedness to resume democratic accountability without Commissioner oversight. This is likely to be drawn from the quarterly reports to DCLG.
- The Council to be invited to submit a brief statement, maximum 6 pages;
- Progress of the intervention to be considered via the Commissioners three monthly reports and evidence statements to the SoSs;
- Discussion with Commissioners;
- Meetings with the Leader and Chief Executive, other Members and officers. Meeting with Leader of the opposition. Use of individual and focus group-style meetings.
- Meetings with selection of key partners and external stakeholders, to include external auditor;
- The team may wish to observe meetings of Cabinet or Overview and Scrutiny;
- Review of key Council documents, which will include staff and resident surveys, partner interviews and other relevant information.

The findings of the health check may be provided in report or presentation form. In addition, a feedback/discussion meeting will be held on the findings with the Commissioner Team and the Council.

The Commissioners team Chief of Staff, Steve Nesbit and officer, Vicky Hartley will provide a liaison point for the team, arranging meetings, venues and responding to information requests. They will put in place appropriate arrangements with the Council to ensure this operates efficiently.

The Team will wish to fine-tune how they approach the task but it is envisaged that the workload may comprise:

- Preparation and pre-reading documents off site (2 days)
- On site meetings and interviews; formulating and presenting initial findings to Commissioners and to Council (4 days – 27th February to 2nd March)
- Final brief report for Commissioners (2 days)

The final report will be submitted to MHCLG by Commissioners.

Mary Ney
Lead Commissioner, Rotherham MBC
Updated 1st December 2017