

# **Neighbourhoods and Environment Scrutiny Committee**

## **Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday, 10 March 2021**

### **Present:**

Councillor Igbon (Chair) – in the Chair

Councillors Azra Ali, Butt, Flanagan, Hassan, Hughes, Jeavons, Kilpatrick, Lynch, Sadler, Whiston, White and Wright

### **Also present:**

Councillor Rahman, Executive Member for Skills, Culture and Leisure

Councillor Richards, Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration

Councillor Midgley, Assistant Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration

Andy Brown, CEO Citizens Advice Manchester

John Ryan, Manager, Shelter Greater Manchester

**Apologies:** Councillor Appleby and Razaq

### **NESC/21/13 Minutes**

#### **Decision**

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 10 February 2021 as a correct record.

### **NESC/21/14 The lifting of eviction restrictions in the Private Rented Sector and the impact of these changes on the homelessness directorate**

The Committee considered a report of the Interim Director of Homelessness that described that at the time of reporting, it was too early to fully understand the demand that would impact on the homelessness directorate due to the lifting of the eviction moratorium. The eviction moratorium had been extended to the 31 March 2021, subject to review, and therefore evictions would not commence until the 14 April at the earliest. This report indicated that demand would increase within the 2021/22 financial year and listed the factors that would impact upon the level of demand.

The main points and themes within the report included: -

- Providing an introduction and background to the Moratorium Legislation;
- An overview of the impact of COVID-19 on the levels of homelessness experienced in Manchester;
- A description of the demand on, and capacity of the service;
- Data on the numbers of people in temporary accommodation;
- Analysis of the potential levels of demand on Homeless Services and the mitigation; and
- Information on the Debt Respite Scheme, a new statutory scheme that would commence on 4 May 2021.

Some of the key points that arose from the Committee's discussions were: -

- Members expressed their appreciation to the Executive Member, officers and all partner agencies in working to support the most vulnerable residents in the city;
- Every opportunity should be utilised in getting key messaging regarding advice and support available to homeless people or those at risk of homelessness out into local communities, including the use of digital advertising screens and banners on schools' railings; and
- Noting the issue of digital exclusion and the need for residents to access advice in a number of ways;
- The need to acknowledge the issue of hidden homelessness and young people;
- How many people were accommodated in dispersed accommodation and how was this split across Manchester and Greater Manchester; and
- What was the approach to inspecting temporary accommodation to ensure they were of the correct standard.

The Committee heard from Andy Brown, CEO Citizens Advice Manchester, who stated that during the Covid pandemic the number of enquiries to their service regarding homelessness had risen by 12% and the number of enquiries from people in the Private Rented Sector had increased by 46%. He stated that it was anticipated that these figures would continue to increase. He advised that they had developed a proactive communications and engagement strategy to raise awareness of the changes in legislation regarding evictions, stating that this work was closely aligned to the work and campaigns by Shelter. He further stated that advice workers engaged with landlords to ensure that any tenants experiencing problems were signposted for appropriate advice at the earliest possibility, in addition the housing related legal advice was still being offered at the courts. He described that Covid had presented challenges and restrictions on how advice had been provided however they had worked to maintain a presence in local community settings, such as providing dedicated video advice kits for residents to access. He commented that as staff continued to be vaccinated the intention was to reinstate face to face advice sessions.

The Committee then heard from John Ryan, Manager, Shelter Greater Manchester. He reiterated the comments of the previous speaker regarding increased levels of demand on the service, in particular in relation to unlawful evictions. He stated that in response to Covid the advice offered was predominately via telephone and commented that this had been very successful. He stated that Shelter also maintained a presence at the courts to offer advice and were seeking to continue engagement with landlords to provide early intervention and advice to avoid crisis situations occurring.

In response to a question from the Chair who asked the invited guests what the Council could do to best support the work of both Shelter and the CAB, Andy Brown, CEO Citizens Advice Manchester stated that an extension of two years to the existing contract with the Council to deliver advice services in Manchester would enable them to continue and develop their work in Manchester. The Committee endorsed this proposal and the Chair stated she would write to the appropriate Executive Member, the Deputy Leader and the Chair of the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny

Committee to propose an extension of two years to the existing contact with the CAB to deliver advice services in Manchester.

The Interim Director of Homelessness described that the priority for the service was delivering preventative work, including working with landlords to negotiate solutions and to encourage residents to seek appropriate advice prior to their situation getting to a crisis point. He stated the service worked closely with a range of partners across the city and were members of the Advice Forum that strengthened the relationships between partner organisations and shared experience and learning.

The Strategic Lead Homelessness stated that the Everyone In programme and A Bed Every Night scheme had witnessed the accommodation of over 500 people in Covid secure accommodation with the intention to support people into appropriate housing solutions. She further commented that the service had established relationships with Centrepont to deliver advice and support to young people in an appropriate setting.

The Strategic Lead Homelessness informed the Committee that there were currently 1704 families in dispersed accommodation, with approximately 500 of these in accommodation in Greater Manchester with the rest remaining within the city. She stated risk assessments were undertaken with each case and the service worked closely with other teams such as education and children's services. She further informed the Committee of the approach taken to inspecting temporary accommodation, noting that during the pandemic contact had been maintained via telephone. Inspections of empty properties in readiness for re-letting had been undertaken during the period of Covid19 adding that the inspections process for occupied properties had recently been risk assessed to ensure the service can be stepped back up now for occupied properties.

The Executive Member for Skills, Culture and Leisure stated that work was currently underway to develop a document that describes the pathways and sources of advice and interventions that were available, and this would be shared with Members when this was available. In response to comments raised regarding digital exclusion he commented that this was acknowledged and all opportunities for providing advice and information were considered, such as libraries and other community settings.

The Executive Member for Skills, Culture and Leisure stated that it was a failure of the government to adequately fund the service to address the issue of homelessness. He stated the funding that had been made available to local authorities had been piecemeal and short term, stating that long-term adequate funding was required to adequately plan and deliver services. He further stated that the government had failed to adequately support the low paid and self-employed during the pandemic, all of which contributed to financial insecurity experienced by residents. In addition, he said there was the issue of the hidden homeless that the government failed to acknowledge. He stated that he continued to make the case that it was local authorities with their knowledge, network and experience that were best placed to respond to the issue of homelessness.

The Chair in concluding this item of business paid tribute to all staff and partners in the VCSE (Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise) sector for their dedication in supporting some of the most vulnerable residents of the city.

## **Decision**

The Committee recommend that the Chair write to the appropriate Executive Member, the Deputy Leader and the Chair of the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee to propose an extension of two years to the existing contact with the CAB to deliver advice services in Manchester.

## **NESC/21/15 Housing Allocations Policy Review**

The Committee considered a report of the Strategic Director, Growth and Development that described the work undertaken to deliver the new social housing allocations scheme on time despite Covid-19 pressures. While noting that the new scheme had not yet been in operation long enough for impact to be assessed, the current housing register position was consistent with the new scheme working as intended.

The main points and themes within the report included: -

- Providing the context and evidence as to why the Allocations Scheme had needed to be reviewed;
- The objectives in undertaking the review;
- Information on revising the Manchester Move IT system, migration of applications and subsequent training;
- An update on the approach adopted to communications; and
- Impact of pandemic and current position.

Some of the key points that arose from the Committee's discussions were: -

- Noting the issue of digital exclusion experienced by many residents was it possible for residents to nominate a person to place proxy bids for properties on their behalf;
- Were staff engaging with local Registered Housing Providers to obtain regular feedback on the implementation and experience of the new system;
- Could Members be provided with information on how to use and navigate the system so they could advise residents if approached on the matter; and
- Recognising the significant amount of work that had taken place to deliver the new system and thanking the Executive Member, the Assistant Executive Member, officers and partners for delivering this project.

In response to the specific question regarding proxy bids, the Housing Access Manager stated that there was the ability to do this within Manchester Move and further information on this function would be forwarded to the Member following the meeting,

The Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration paid tribute to all staff involved with the delivery of the new system, despite the challenges presented by Covid. She

advised the Committee that demand on the service remained high and it was anticipated to increase, noting the discussion on the previous agenda item. She described that there had been an increase of 1500 entries onto the register, with 900 of these applications in the highest priority banding emphasising the importance of targeting a scarce resource for the most vulnerable, commenting that the high need compared to the low turnover of available housing.

The Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration stated that in response to this Manchester was committed to delivering new affordable housing across the city and made reference to the schemes that were in development, all of which was regularly reported to the Economy Scrutiny Committee. She added that work on these projects had continued despite Covid and it was anticipated that they would exceed the target set to deliver affordable housing. She further advised that the Council would be establishing a housing company to build more much needed social and affordable housing by maximising Homes England grants and utilising council owned land.

The Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration stated that information would be recirculated to the Members regarding navigating the online system, adding that the Frequently Asked Question section on the Manchester Move website was particularly helpful.

The Assistant Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration stated that she also wished to pay tribute to all of the staff across all partners who had worked to implement the Manchester Move system, adding that that this had involved a significant amount of IT work and data migration. She informed the Members that a number of online training and awareness sessions on the new system had been delivered that had been attended by a range of VCSE groups, commenting that these had proven very successful. She stated that an evaluation of the new system and policy would continue to be monitored to measure outcomes against the objectives and ambitions of the new allocations scheme, adding that the Housing Access Board was a forum in which the views and experience of Housing Providers could be obtained.

## **Decisions**

The Committee;

1. Note that the ability to draw any reasonable conclusions about the effectiveness of the new scheme from the 12-month interim evaluation due at the start of 2022 will be affected by the continuing pandemic and the special measures put in place for the most vulnerable; and
2. Note that the effectiveness of the new scheme will best be evaluated by the planned evaluation after 24 months, at the start of 2023.

## **NESC/21/16 Overview Report**

The report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit which contained key decisions within the Committee's remit and responses to previous recommendations

was submitted for comment. Members were also invited to agree the Committee's future work programme.

The Committee noted that this would be the last formal meeting of the Neighbourhoods and Environment Scrutiny Committee and that the Environment and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee would convene in May. Noting that the remit of the Committee would change, the new Committee would hold a work programming session at its first meeting planned for 27 May 2021. The Chair commented that she would speak with officers following this meeting to consider scheduling appropriate items of business for the May meeting in addition to the work programming session. Members of the Committee endorsed the Chair's proposal.

### **Decision**

Subject to the comments above, to note the report.