

Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 12 October 2021

Present:

Councillor Russell (Chair) – in the Chair
Councillors Ahmed Ali, Andrews, Clay, Hitchen, Kirkpatrick, Lanchbury, B Priest, Robinson, A Simcock, Wheeler and Wright

Also present:

Councillor Craig, Deputy Leader (Finance)
Councillor Rahman, Deputy Leader (Equalities and Human Resources)
Councillor Igbon (Lead Member, Race, Women)

Apologies: Councillor Davies and Rowles

RGSC/19/46 Minutes

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 7 September 2021 as a correct record.

RGSC/19/47 Update from the Revenues and Benefits Unit

The Committee considered the report of the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer, that provided an update on the activity of the Revenues and Benefits Unit, including details of how the service was affected and maintained during the pandemic.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Benefits administration, including Council Tax Support and the management of the Welfare Provision Scheme as well as other discretionary schemes;
- The financial support provided as part of the Test and Trace Scheme;
- Performance in the collection of council tax and how we balance collection, whilst working in an ethical way and supporting those residents on a low income; and
- Performance in the collection of business rates including the support that has been made to businesses during the pandemic.

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

- Welcoming the comprehensive report and recognising the positive contribution the service made to the residents of the city;
- Noting that 79% of applications to the Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) funding were successful, what alternative support was provided to those application that were not successful;

- Noting the increased pressures experienced by residents as a result of a reduction in Universal Credit and the freeze in Local Housing Allowance (LHA), was it anticipated that the LHA rate would increase;
- Was the budget allocated to deliver support to residents sufficient to meet the demand;
- Were the incidents of evictions increasing;
- Are there any figures available to indicate how many households were seeking to move to more affordable accommodation;
- What measures had been introduced through the Council Tax scheme to encourage owners of empty properties to bring them back into use;
- Was data available at a ward level that detailed the numbers of long term empty properties;
- Were officers confident that all residents that were eligible for Council Tax support during the pandemic had accessed this;
- What was the approach taken to the assessment of applications to the Welfare Provision Scheme;
- An explaining was sought as to the changes in the reported figures of 4,331 children who received Free School Meals – Alternative Support during the Easter period and 6,709 for the autumn half-term;
- How had the findings of the Manchester Poverty Truth Commission been communicated to staff administering support;
- With reference to Council Tax collection rates, how did Manchester compare to other cities; and
- What modelling was done to predict future Business Rates levels in the city;
- Was the Director confident that staff were capturing all of the larger families who were potentially eligible for support under our Council Tax Support Scheme, whose third and subsequent children were potentially not eligible for benefit support under national government criteria?

The Deputy Leader (Finance) said that the report represented and reflected the important work that the service provided to protect the most vulnerable residents across the city. She paid tribute to the staff working in the service who continue to strive to improve the outcomes for residents. She highlighted that this was in the context of continued austerity, cuts to Universal Credit and a freeze to the Local Housing Allowance. She gave reference to the Council having passed a motion deploring the cut to Universal Credit and said that Manchester would continue to lobby the Government on this issue. She said that despite the financial challenges placed on the city as a result of unfair funding settlements, Manchester had taken the decision to fund this discretionary scheme.

The Director of Customer Services and Transactions said that all staff assessing an application for a discretionary award took a holistic approach to the circumstances of the individual. She said that each case was treated on its own merits with the priority to keep people safe and to maintain the occupancy of their home. She stated that this could be complex and challenging and regrettably not all applications would be successful. She added that for those that were unsuccessful appropriate sign posting to alternative support was provided.

The Head of Corporate Assessments commented that a written decision notice would be issued following a DHP application and if an application had been refused the individual could request that decision was reviewed and the applicant had the opportunity to submit any additional supporting evidence to assist the decision maker. He commented that the decision to extend any existing DHP award during the pandemic without the need to reapply was a positive step, noting that as the lock down restrictions began to be lifted people would be invited to reapply, with the budget being used to support the most vulnerable residents and prevent homelessness. He described that systems had been established to support those residents at risk of being evicted from their property.

The Head of Corporate Assessments said that weekly reporting on the DHP budget was undertaken to understand the pressures and trends and to flag any concerns if necessary.

The Head of Corporate Assessments also said that following his previous experience when dealing with the Valuation Office Agency who determine Local Housing Allowance rates, he was not optimistic that the rates would be reassessed.

The Director of Customer Services and Transactions said that the service did not have the time or resources to be able to collate data on the numbers of households across the city wanting to move to more affordable housing at any one time.

The Director of Customer Services and Transactions explained that Officers and Members from the Council were involved in the recent Manchester Poverty Truth Commission that was published earlier this year. This included the commissioner role and to take part in a specific session on how the collection of council tax could be improved. She made reference to principles that had been agreed following this process and said that these had been shared across the service to reinforce the requirements of council staff to support and inform the dialogue that staff had with residents.

The Director of Customer Services and Transactions informed the Committee that having listened to the wishes and preferences of the management team at the Oasis Centre it had been agreed that access to four named individuals in the council tax back office had been given as a contact to deal with any enquiries and resolve issues brought up by the local community who visit the facility.

The Head of Corporate Revenues advised the Members that the numbers of empty properties (empty for 2 years) had reduced from c1400 properties in 2013 to c400 currently. He stated that those properties empty for over ten years attracted a 400% Council Tax charge. He also said that they worked closely with colleagues in Strategic Housing with the intention to work with owners to bring properties back into use. In terms of empty property data at a ward level, he advised this could be provided to Members following the meeting.

The Director of Customer Services and Transactions addressed the comments regarding Council Tax collection rates by stating that compared to other cities Manchester's performance was not as good in terms of in year collection rates, noting the particular challenges presented by the pandemic. She said it was

important to understand why people on a limited income or benefits struggle to pay their arrears or were reluctant to engage on this issue. She said that the intention was to engage with people who have arrears, understand their particular circumstances and establish a realistic and sustainable repayment plan. The Head of Corporate Revenues commented that for those people who were working and earning a reasonable income yet refused to pay their Council Tax an attachment to earnings could be applied to recover debts.

The Head of Corporate Assessments advised that the take up of the Free School Meals – Alternative Support had been promoted by using the eligibility information retained by schools. He stated that as Universal Credit was administered by the DWP the Revenues and Benefits Unit no longer maintain a list of all those that were eligible, however by working with the schools the FSM offer was promoted and as knowledge of this scheme became known amongst families the uptake figures were seen to increase.

The Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer explained that the modelling for the predicted levels of Business Rates to be collected in future years was conducted by Finance Officers using a range of metrics. He also confirmed that the Service believed that they were capturing all relevant larger families for the Council Tax Support Scheme.

Decision

To note the report.

RGSC/19/48 Equalities Strategy Implementation update

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Human Resources and Organisation Development, which provided Members with an update on progress to date to increase diversity in the organisation, ensure we are an inclusive employer and to challenge discrimination.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- The context and development of the Strategy, which had arisen from the findings of an external review of race issues published in 2020;
- An update on a range of activities over the last 12 months against identified actions, arising from the review;
- An update on the ongoing development of a revised Workforce Equalities Strategy; and
- Conclusions.

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

- The extended scope of the data the organisation now gathers from its workforce, and how the collection of data is embedded across the Strategy
- Progress towards achieving parity across the disciplinary action process for employees
- Changes to the organisation's recruitment practices

- Communication strategy

The Race Lead for Women welcomed the report and the organisation's ambition to eradicate all forms of discrimination. She spoke about her involvement in the Working Group and said that she was encouraged to see that early feedback from staff had been positive. She said it was important to recognise that the overarching purpose of the Strategy was to ensure that the organisation's employment practices recognised and respected differences amongst all employees, and that those differences were not solely confined to race or ethnicity but were represented across all of Manchester's communities. She acknowledged the breadth and quality of work undertaken at pace to develop a more comprehensive and inclusive workforce strategy that discriminates against no one. She thanked officers for their ongoing commitment to developing the Strategy.

There was a discussion about the work undertaken to close the gaps that had been identified in the data that the organisation gathers on the workforce. The Committee was informed that the organisation's staff monitoring classifications had been significantly broadened out to develop a richer picture demographically of the workforce population. This had been done in consultation with Trade Unions, focus and community interest groups and the information gathered would again be evaluated alongside updated census data due next year. The revised categories were tested out in a recent staff survey and had received a good response rate with further surveys underway. The Chair commented that completion of the revised survey had been disappointingly low (44%) amongst managers graded 10 and above. The Chair noted that although she would not wish to see anyone pushed to provide information if it made them uncomfortable, she would be worried if given the work done in this area, large numbers of senior leaders were unhappy about providing it. There was a discussion about potential barriers to completion and the essential role Leaders and Managers play in headlining the implementation of policy change. Mindful that completion itself was discretionary and therefore not a compulsory requirement for any staff, the Committee noted that active discussions with the Senior Management Team were planned to explore ways to improve completion rates and gather data across the directorates.

With regard to tracking employee progression within the organisation, the Deputy Director HROD said that the employee appraisal system was an ideal way to set objectives and monitor progress over 12 months. She agreed to circulate information to committee members about the revised appraisal system following the meeting. She added that proposals were also underway to review the 'About You' (one-to-one) system with particular reference to the developing Strategy.

Mindful of the sensitivities around the disclosure of suspected discrimination, the use of exit questionnaires as a possible way to explore retention issues was discussed. Members were informed that whilst exit questionnaires were an available option for employees leaving the organisation, uptake was historically low, despite the alternative submission route through HROD. Options were however being considered for the development of exit questionnaires for employees leaving a particular service yet remaining within the wider organisation.

There was a discussion about the need to champion both the organisation's zero tolerance approach to discrimination and the volume of work being delivered to support its implementation. The Race Lead for Women felt that the positive and inclusive message this relayed to staff should be celebrated. The Deputy Director HROD spoke about the broad programme of research and engagement which had revealed a strong message around the need for parity in the Strategy's commitment to both anti-discrimination and inclusivity. This message would therefore form the central message of all aspects of communication about the strategy and would be reflected through various processes to reinforce that balanced approach through variety of strategies to raise awareness.

Discussions moved to a previously reported issue around a disparity in disciplinary cases involving Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff who had been disproportionately represented in proceedings that took place in the 2018/19 municipal year. Whilst acknowledging a significant statistical drop in cases more recently, the numbers were still not at parity and Members sought assurance that this matter had been and would continue to be appropriately explored and addressed. The Deputy Director HROD described the extensive involvement of the HR casework team, whose role of support and challenge was to ensure that there was consistency across those proceedings and explore all possible underlying factors that may have influenced the decision to progress to disciplinary action.

With regard to the delivery of equalities training, the Committee noted that amongst a range of learning objectives, this aimed to raise awareness about the impact of unconscious bias as well as exploring other attitudes and beliefs that may adversely affect behaviours or decision-making. Members expressed an interest in being included in this type of training so that they may play a more active role in supporting the delivery of Strategy. It was also suggested that such training should be targeted to managers who are graded below Grade 10.

There was a discussion about how the impact of the various number of outputs would be evaluated for effectiveness. Members expressed the view that there should be an appropriate focus on auditing and measurable outcomes to help determine whether meaningful progress had been made and to underpin further decision making. It was also suggested that staff groups should be consulted about the development of targets. The Talent and Diversity Lead gave assurance that whilst the Strategy itself formed the overarching document, numerous detailed action plans sat beneath and that specific pieces of work had been commissioned to extract the highest quality and most accurate data. He added that the aim of the Strategy was not purely to focus on protected characteristics but to create a working environment where all employees could thrive, be treated with respect and dignity and feel supported by the organisation's zero tolerance approach to all forms of discrimination.

There was a discussion about the organisation's recruitment practices. It was noted that austerity measures had contributed to a greater focus on internal recruitment. The Committee was informed that the organisation was about to embark on a full scale review of the application of its recruitment policies and practices with a view to developing task based assessments to develop a more inclusive recruitment process that provides for all forms of diversity.

The Deputy Leader (Equalities and Human Resources) spoke about the findings of the race review and welcomed the organisation's clear commitment and enthusiasm to address those imbalances at pace. In response to questioning regarding the budget for this work, he stated that there was no specific budget but that resources were being committed as required. He urged the Committee to note that whilst the update given today provided some insight into the wholesale transformation of the organisation's recruitment policies, these initial measures should be seen as the early foundations of the organisation's solid commitment to eradicate the perception of a 'glass ceiling' for any employee and uphold that talent will be recognised irrespective of an employee's background or protected characteristic. He added that progress reports on the development and implementation of the revised Strategy would be submitted to future meetings of this Committee.

Decision

1. To welcome the latest version of the Workforce Equality Strategy and note the progress towards increasing diversity across the organisation.
2. To note that a further reports on the development and implementation of the Workforce Equality Strategy will be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

RGSC/19/49 Overview Report

The Committee considered the report by the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit which provided details of key decisions that fall within the Committee's remit and an update on actions resulting from the Committee's recommendations. The report also includes the Committee's work programme, which the Committee was asked to amend as appropriate and agree.

No amendments to the Work Programme were proposed.

Decision

To note the overview report and agree the Committee's Work Programme.