

Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 7 March 2023

Present:

Councillor Simcock (Chair) – in the Chair
Councillors Andrews, Davies, Kirkpatrick, Lanchbury, Rowles and Wheeler

Also present:

Councillor Rahman, Statutory Deputy Leader
Councillor Akbar, Executive Member for Finance and Resources
Councillor Igbon, Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods

Apologies: Councillor B Priest

Thanks

In opening the meeting, the Chair noted Councillor Priest's apologies and that this would have been his last meeting before retiring in May. The Chair wished Councillor Priest well in his retirement and thanked him for his work on the committee.

RGSC/23/14 Minutes

Decision: That the minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 7 February 2023 be approved as a correct record.

RGSC/23/15 Update on the progress of Manchester's Park Development Programme 2021-2025

The committee considered a report of the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer and the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) which provided an overview of the financial (revenue and capital) position for parks and an update on the programme of investment to deliver revenue savings beyond 2021.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- The objectives and vision of Manchester's Park Strategy;
- Progress on the delivery of the Strategy;
- The balanced revenue budget position which had been maintained to generate income and capital investment to enhance the parks offer;
- There was an estimated 4.7million visits to Manchester's parks in 2021/22;
- The additional investment for parks provided by S106 funding and match funding from strategic partners, such as British Cycling, the Lawn Tennis Association, Transport for Greater Manchester (via Highways) and Veolia;
- A total of £3.56million was invested across the Parks estate through Park Development Programme and Section 106 and Parks in Partnership (PIP) funding; and

- The projects completed in 2022/23 and future projects planned.

Key points and queries that arose from the committee's discussions included:

- Welcoming the report and progress made on the Park Development Programme;
- How new partnerships are attracted in order to generate income;
- Progress in the development of the Age Friendly Strategy;
- The safety of women and girls in the city's parks, and how this was being considered by the Council;
- Welcoming developments at Heaton Park for families; reopening The Orangery; providing electric vehicle charging points; and being used as a base for school buses to promote walking and the wider park;
- How the average length of a visit to parks is measured;
- How the increase in income had been achieved; and
- What challenges had been faced during progress of the Park Development Programme.

In introducing the item, the Chair welcomed the report and stated that he had shared the report with the Chairs of the 'Friends of...' groups for the three parks within his ward of Didsbury East to highlight the grants available.

The Parks Lead stated that strong progress had been made on the delivery of Manchester's Park Strategy and she recognised the 13% uplift in visitor numbers and significant investment through the Parks Development Programme and ad hoc funding from Section 106 and partner investments, which enabled investment of over £3.5million across the parks' estate in the past year. She stated that this had enabled the service to maximise its assets, widen participation and visitor numbers, generate income from supplementary services such as cafes. It provided support to reduce the gap between income and expenditure, which ensured a sustainable budget position.

The Parks Lead also wished to place on her record her thanks to stakeholders and partners who supported the day-to-day delivery of park services and investment.

In response to a member's query regarding new partnerships, the Parks Lead explained that many partners and stakeholders had approached the Parks service due to the value of Manchester's parks and the benefits of being aligned with them. The service worked with potential partners to identify the outcomes that they could deliver to ensure best value in the long-term.

Work on the Age Friendly Strategy was progressing strongly and there was significant focus on the accessibility and inclusivity of parks. This included setting an age-friendly standard when considering future developments, the suitability of infrastructure and reflecting on the need for face-to-face communications with visitors.

The Parks Lead noted that the design of parks and green open spaces nationally had largely been male-led and landscapes could reflect a gendered view. Manchester's parks service aimed to reset this balance by ensuring links with the Youth Council and the Council's Youth team. Consultation had also been undertaken when

developing the Park Plans with 'Friends of...' groups who utilised and supported individual parks on a daily basis. This would also be extended to reach those who do not use parks to understand reasons and issues behind this.

The Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods highlighted the need for the Park Strategy to align with the Our Manchester Strategy, and this reflected priorities for the safety of women and girls and being age friendly. She explained that extra lighting would be provided where needed to improve safety. She also stated that the Council would assess all possible revenue streams for its parks.

In response to the Chair's query regarding measuring length of time spent in parks, it was explained that the service employed new technology which tracked general location, amount of time spent on site and areas of the park visited through anonymous mobile data. The Parks Lead confirmed that this technology was fully compliant with data protection regulations and was useful in providing concrete data on the usage of parks.

The Parks Lead advised that increased income had been generated through utilising this data to highlight the popularity of concessions and market these to potential partners. She emphasised the great assets within Manchester's parks which were celebrated and helped to bolster interest from potential partners. Members were also advised that following investment in cycle tracks at Wythenshawe Park, coached cycling sessions were held which generated additional income.

Members were informed that ice cream sales were the most profitable concession and generated around £130k of income per year.

In response to a query regarding challenges to the Park Development Programme, the Parks Lead explained that the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted partnership working with communities, which was a key priority for the Programme, and noted challenges in working with difficult-to-reach communities. She explained that this was the first time that the service used a funding workstream for the Parks in Partnership (PIP) scheme. Lessons had been learnt as a result of this and good progress had been made on the workstream in the last year with 98 PIP applications received.

Issues with price increases in the construction industry and delays were also acknowledged but these were communicated effectively to stakeholders to ensure transparency.

Decision:

That the report be noted.

RGSC/23/16 Update from the Revenues and Benefits Unit

The committee considered a report of the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer which provided an update on the activity of the Revenues and Benefits Unit as set out in the June 2022 Scrutiny Report, including final details of recently completed Covid schemes and ongoing cost of living schemes delivered by the service.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- Benefits administration, including Council Tax Support and the management of the Welfare Provision Scheme and other discretionary schemes;
- The financial support provided by the Household Support Fund scheme; the Energy Grant Scheme; the Council Tax Support Fund; the Energy Bills Support Scheme Alternative Funding programme; and the Alternative Fuel Payment Alternative Funding scheme;
- Performance in the collection of council tax and how the Council balances collection whilst working in an ethical way and supporting those residents on a low income; and
- Performance in the collection of business rates and the financial support provided to businesses through various Business Rates Reliefs and grants.
- Data for the 2021/22 financial year and available data to show activity between 1 April and 31 December of the 2022/23 financial year.

Key points and queries that arose from the committee's discussions included:

- Commending the service for its work and the support provided to residents;
- Whether the Council would be able to continue using earnings and employer information supplied by HMRC if the trial of this scheme was to end;
- If the Council attended or was represented at community Cost-of-Living advice events;
- Whether the Council could contact residents who had not yet used the Post Office vouchers provided as a one-off grant to households in receipt of Council Tax Support where bank details were not known;
- What officers would change if they had a magic wand;
- Noting that the temporary Household Support Fund had been extended for 12 months, and how the Council would deal with the impact of this ending;
- Why 100% of business rates had not yet been collected;
- How much of the business rates growth the Council had retained; and
- Noting that there were 92 residents who earned over £40,000 a year and were not engaging with the council in respect of arrears and querying the reasons and circumstances behind this.

The Head of Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services highlighted key points and achievements outlined within the report and explained that the Revenues and Benefits unit sought to ensure that any available local and national funding had the best impact for residents and communities whilst supporting the Council's priorities and Our Manchester Strategy.

The Head of Corporate Revenues explained that recent discussions with the Cabinet Office suggested that the HMRC trial would continue for those authorities already participating following productive meetings with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). However, he confirmed that the Council would not receive earnings and employer information if the scheme was not implemented nationally.

The Head of Corporate Assessments stated that there was no direct representation of the Revenues and Benefits service at cost-of-living advice events, but other

organisations and agencies would be able to signpost attendees to the Council and other schemes if required. He explained that the Helping Hands document captured the range of support available, but discussions could be held with the Neighbourhood teams to understand whether attendance from the Revenues and Benefits unit could add value to the events.

In response to a query regarding unused Post Office vouchers, the Head of Corporate Assessments explained that the Council had a high level of reach when issuing the Energy Bills rebate compared to other Core Cities and nationally. He explained that there were fewer opportunities to reach residents eligible for the Discretionary Fund and that text messages, postcards and social media posts were used to encourage take up of Post Office vouchers.

In response to a query as to what officers would change if they had a magic wand, it was suggested that any mistrust of the service or perception that it was not there to help residents would be removed.

The Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer noted that it was difficult to understand the impact of the Household Support Fund ending but the Council could not mitigate for national policy decisions on funding. She explained that the Council would balance the schemes it had in place and the 2024/25 budget would include funding for schemes such as Council Tax Support.

In response to queries around business rates, the committee was advised that there was still 3 months remaining of the collection period and it was hoped that the collection rate would increase to 97% with officers continuing to pursue collections. The Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer confirmed that Greater Manchester as a region retained 100% of business rates growth above the baseline, which equated to approximately £10million per annum for Manchester and a share of this was returned to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA).

A request was made by a member for a map showing the council tax band of every property in individual wards. The Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer explained that this information would have to be provided in a citywide map for ethical reasons.

In response to a query by the Chair, the Head of Corporate Revenues explained that there was a multitude of reasons as to why some residents earning over £40,000 per annum were not engaging with the Council in respect of council tax arrears. Examples included domestic issues, financial troubles and being unwilling to pay. He explained that the HMRC trial helped to engage with residents in this situation.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources commended the work of the Revenues and Benefits Unit and took the opportunity to encourage residents in need of help to contact the Council for support.

Decision:

That the Committee

1. notes the report, and

2. expresses hope that the HMRC information-sharing scheme continues and is rolled out nationally.

RGSC/23/17 Refreshed Community Asset Transfer Policy Update

The committee considered a report of the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer which outlined key points of a review of the Community Asset Transfer Policy, which had been requested by the Statutory Deputy Leader, and proposed a revised Policy.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- Community Asset Transfer (CAT) involved the leasing of Council land or buildings to a Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisation, usually at less than market value for local social, economic, or environmental benefit;
- The numbers of completed and ongoing Community Asset Transfers;
- The methods and work undertaken as part of the policy review;
- Feedback received through the review; and
- The aims and objectives of the revised policy and process.

Key points and queries that arose from the committee's discussions included:

- Welcoming the greater clarity and transparency of the revised policy;
- Requesting that a list of all assets available for transfer be provided to members on a biannual or annual basis; and
- Whether there was a reduction in the number of community assets as more were transferred to VCS organisations.

In introducing the item, the Statutory Deputy Leader stated that many VCS organisations in Manchester utilised the Council's community assets to deliver valuable services for communities. He stated that there was currently an ad hoc process for expressing interest in a CAT and the revised policy would provide a fair and transparent application process for VSC organisations.

The Head of Estates and Facilities explained that the Council had a long history of working in partnership with the voluntary and community sector and key feedback indicated that the previous policy was technical, and the approach was unclear. He stated that the revised policy and process was clearer and included changes such as offering opportunities to the sector as a whole; being more proactive in advertising opportunities for CATs; and aligning the policy with the Council's wider asset management planning to be clearer on which buildings are available for transfer.

In response to a member's request for a list of all assets available for transfer, the Statutory Deputy Leader advised that this information would be made available on the Council's website and would be updated regularly.

The Statutory Deputy Leader also commented that there was natural turnover in the availability of community assets, and he stated that empty community assets were of no benefit to the Council or the community and he wished to fully utilise these.

Decision:

That the committee endorses the recommendations made to the Executive.

RGSC/23/18 Progress on Council Motions over the last 12 Months

The committee considered a report of the City Solicitor which provided an update on the progress made in respect of motions that had been passed before Manchester City Council over the last 12 months.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- Decisions on motions were considered by the members of the Council's senior management and any necessary plans of action agreed and acted upon. Progress was then tracked on a periodic basis by SMT; and
- The actions taken for each of the motions passed over the last 12 months with the progress made to date.

The Chair noted that many of the Council motions did not require action from officers and the City Solicitor explained that this was due to the political nature of some resolutions. She stated that these motions were recorded nonetheless and that she liaised with the Leader's Office to ensure that any actions arising from motions of a political nature, such as where the Council resolved the lobby the government, were also documented.

Decision:

That the report be noted.

RGSC/23/19 Progress Update on the Major Contracts Oversight Board

The committee considered a report of the Head of Integrated Commissioning and Procurement which provided an overview of the work of the Major Contracts Review Board and the development of the Delivery Model Assessment Policy which will set out the issues to be considered in deciding on the approach to future major contracts.

Key themes and points within the report included:

- The establishment of the Major Contracts Review Board was recommended by this committee in July 2022 to evaluate all major contracts;
- The main aims and terms of reference of the Board;
- The work of the Board to date; and
- A clear policy framework had been created to guide decision-making on the appropriate delivery model options for major contracts, which was of heightened profile following the adoption of a recent Council motion that advocated insourcing as the default option for services.

Key points and queries that arose from the committee's discussions included:

- Welcoming the update;

- If and how the Board considered potential future contracts and the possibility of insourcing in the future;
- Why works were considered out-of-scope of the policy framework for major service delivery model decisions;
- The need for greater clarity in the policy as to the criteria for a contract being awarded through a key decision;
- Suggesting that the work of the Association for Public Service Excellence, which the Council subscribed to, be highlighted in the policy's scope;
- Noting that trade unions were not mentioned in the discussion paper, and querying how the Council would liaise with trade unions where it was considering bringing a service in-house;
- The need to reflect the democratic will and electoral mandates;
- The number of silver and bronze contracts and the process for awarding these; and
- How Members could find information on the Council's contracts.

In introducing the item, the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer stated that the Board had oversight of those contracts which were of significant reputational, financial or strategic importance to the Council but did not have oversight of major capital contracts and those between the Council and other public bodies. She stated that the Board had met three times since its establishment in November 2022 and there had been a focus around delivery models.

The Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer stated that the report aimed to highlight the importance of the lead-in time for deciding the approach to future major contracts and it was important to understand and have capacity within these services, which was a key objective of the Board. The Strategic Lead – Commissioning also explained that the draft Delivery Model Options Discussion Paper would introduce new practice and require officers to consider insourcing when assessing all contracts rated gold.

The Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer clarified that works listed as out-of-scope referred to major capital construction and not lower-level maintenance and the wording of this would be revised for clarity.

She confirmed that she was the statutory officer for contract decisions and that these needed to be transparent and account for value-for-money and policy direction. It was also stated that the Council was a democratic local authority and would be mindful the mandate of elected members.

In response to discussions around trade unions, the committee was advised that these were referenced as part of the engagement consultation, and this was included on the agenda of the next Corporate Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) meeting.

The Strategic Lead – Commissioning stated that there were currently over 1000 lines in the contract registers, although these included Framework Agreements and low-level contracts. Members were also advised that the contract for a new contract management system had recently been awarded with the new system being implemented soon.

He also explained that all formally procured and awarded contracts over £25,000 were uploaded to The Chest, which was the Council's procurement portal and was available for public inspection through the website. The Council also had to publish spend data for all expenditure over £500 monthly, which was also available on the website. It was clarified that some social care spending was not included due to data protection regulations around personal information.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources commented that the Delivery Model Options Discussion Paper and Policy were in the early stages of development and assured members that this would reinforce the Council's commitment to insourcing where appropriate. He acknowledged that residents wanted value-for-money and the best use of public funds to deliver high-standard services. He stated that the policy would provide the Council with the capacity to progress and deliver on the commitment to insourcing whilst also continuing to provide important services for residents.

Decision:

That the Committee

1. notes the report;
2. recommends that the works listed as out-of-scope of the policy be clarified to reflect that this did not include maintenance; and
3. recommends that the work of the Association for Public Service Excellence be highlighted in the policy's scope.

RGSC/23/20 Overview Report

The Committee considered the report by the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit which provided details of key decisions that fell within the Committee's remit and the Committee's work programme, which was to be amended as appropriate and agreed.

The Chair informed members of the committee that the next meeting would consider two substantive items and work planning for the new municipal year.

Decision:

That the report be noted, and the work programme agreed.