

Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 10 January 2023

Present:

Councillor Hitchen - In the Chair

Councillors Benham, Chambers, Connolly, Evans, Hilal, Hussain, Johnson, Ogunbambo, H Priest, Rawson, Sheikh, Whiston, Wills and Wilson

Also present:

Councillor Midgley, Deputy Leader

Councillor Igbon, Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods

Councillor Reid, Chair of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Paula Lyons, Greater Manchester Fire & Rescue Service (GMFRS)

Superintendent Paul Walker, Greater Manchester Police (GMP)

Apologies:

Councillors Azra Ali and M Dar

CESC/23/1 Minutes

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 6 December 2022 as a correct record.

CESC/23/2 An update report on the Homelessness Service

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Housing Operations which provided an update on the Homelessness Service and the improvement and transformation that was happening across the service in an increasingly challenging social and economic context.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Preventing homelessness;
- Work to end rough sleeping;
- Work to considerably reduce the use of temporary accommodation; and
- Delivering better outcomes and better lives for people and families at risk or who were homeless.

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

- Recognising the challenges that the city was facing and thanking officers for the work that was taking place to make improvements, including welcoming the focus on preventing homelessness;
- Noting that additional officers had been assigned to answer calls to the Housing Solutions Service, was it possible to increase this further, given that the target for the service was to be answering 85% of calls by the end of March 2023;

- What did Manchester need from the national government to address the homelessness problem;
- Emergency accommodation for rough sleepers with dogs;
- To request a further update report early in the next municipal year, including data on the use of temporary accommodation and its geographical spread, noting the benefits of people being able to remain near their community networks;
- Would the 200 units of self-contained dispersed accommodation be located within Manchester and noting that these were for families, not single homeless people;
- Did the Council have any property which it could convert into temporary accommodation; and
- The impact on children of living in temporary accommodation away from their community support network.

The Chair of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee questioned whether the rent amounts in appendix 3 reflected the current situation as, she advised, landlords were increasing rents after evicting tenants. She stated that the time taken to move new tenants into social rented housing after the previous tenants had left was too long. She expressed concern at the costs of bed-and-breakfast accommodation and stated that cheaper alternatives should be considered. She questioned why Camden's figures for households in temporary accommodation were so much lower than Manchester's. She questioned whether community connection could be taken into account when allocating social housing and whether more could be done to incentivise families to allow their adult children to live with them.

In response to a Member's question, the Assistant Director of Homelessness reported that the count of rough sleepers was city-wide and included the airport. He agreed with a Member's comment that answering 85% of calls was still not good enough but advised that improvements were being made incrementally, that significant progress had already been made in the number of calls being answered and that the service would continue to work to improve this further.

The Strategic Lead for Homelessness invited Members to contact her if they wanted to join one of the counts of rough sleepers. She reported that work was taking place to encourage people to access the Housing Solutions Service digitally to increase capacity and make the service more easily accessible, while recognising that many people preferred to contact the service by telephone. She reported that her service worked with the Dogs Trust and that there were hostels in the city which were very dog-friendly and others which would consider accepting pets on a case-by-case basis. In response to a question about right-sizing, she advised that her service could assist people who were in properties which were too large for them to find a suitable-sized property and provide other incentives, such as helping an older person with packing and moving or carpeting or decorating the new property.

In response to a question about case checks, the Assistant Director of Homelessness outlined how, over a ten-week period, service managers would come to have a firm understanding of all live homeless application cases.

In response to a Member's question, the Strategic Lead (Housing) provided an overview of the work to build more affordable homes in the city.

The Deputy Leader reported that more investment was needed from national government to build affordable housing, including social rented housing, at the scale that was needed, although the Council was working hard with its partners to maximise what could be delivered. She advised that the case needed to be made to the next national government about what big cities needed from them to address the housing crisis, and in the meantime, Members should continue to lobby on Section 21 evictions and the Local Housing Allowance.

In response to a Member's question, the Assistant Director of Homelessness advised that the future plans for the 'A Bed Every Night' (ABEN) scheme and the Etrop Service were still being discussed. He advised that the focus on families in relation to the 200 units was due to the legal position that bed-and-breakfast accommodation was never suitable for a family and could only be used in exceptional circumstances and then for no longer than six weeks, and also the negative impact that being in bed-and-breakfast accommodation had on children; however, he highlighted other work focused on single people which was detailed in the report. He advised that the 200 units would be almost exclusively within Manchester although consideration could be given to locations on the borders of the city. He advised that placing families in these 200 units would save the Council £7 million per year and provide them with decent accommodation. He explained how Camden's allocations policy encouraged people to contact the Council earlier which gave more time to find a solution for their housing issue and that this had informed the proposal for Manchester to change its allocations policy. In response to a Member's question, he advised that there was no timeframe for how long someone could be placed in temporary accommodation and that it was usually until a longer term accommodation offer could be found, which could be a number of years. In response to a question about people who could not provide a guarantor, which was requested by some private landlords, he advised that the service considered each case on an individual basis and would negotiate with landlords to reach an equitable solution.

The Director of Housing Operations informed the Committee that his service was looking at 44 Council assets which could be considered for re-purposing as accommodation. He outlined how homelessness prevention work would help keep people in their own communities with their support networks. He advised that the number of void social rented properties had significantly reduced and was now less than 1.5% of housing stock.

The Chair asked whether the Committee had received a response to the letter sent to Michael Gove in November 2022 and, as they had not, requested that a further letter be sent, inviting him to Manchester to see the impact of the government's policies in the city and to see the strengths of the people of Manchester and the great work that Council officers were doing. She also thanked officers for their work.

Decisions

1. To write to Michael Gove to invite him to visit Manchester.

2. To receive a further report early in the next municipal year.

CESC/23/3 Bonfire Night Events

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) which provided an overview of the approach to planning and delivery of a safe Bonfire/fireworks season. The report included details of anti-social behaviour during this period and an assessment of the impact of the Council's decision not to reinstate Bonfire Night events during 2022.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Background information;
- The Greater Manchester Bonfire Campaign 2022;
- Bonfire and fireworks incidents; and
- The future of Bonfire Night events.

Paula Lyons from GMFRS informed the Committee that her service's official report would not be available until early February but that it would be shared with partners when it was available. She reported that the service's data showed that there had been a slight increase in bonfire and firework-related incidents in 2022 but fewer attacks on firefighters, with two incidents involving the throwing of fireworks at firefighters and fire engines.

Superintendent Paul Walker from GMP reported that it was expected that there would be a level of anti-social behaviour up to and including Bonfire Night and that the levels in 2022 were as expected in a typical year.

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

- That official Bonfire Night displays held in Wythenshawe Park in previous years had created problems for local people, for example in relation to parking, and that, as a local Ward Councillor, a Member had received positive comments from residents about not having this issue around Bonfire Night 2022, rather than people complaining that an official event was not held;
- The environmental impact of Bonfire Night events, including people travelling to an official display;
- The community events and activities to replace Bonfire Night displays and whether these were held in or attracted people from the wards highlighted in the report as the worst affected by fireworks incidents; and
- Identifying shops which were selling fireworks to children.

The Head of Parks outlined the reasons for not reinstating the Bonfire Night displays in 2022, including the funding gap which would have required diverting funds from other areas, the environmental impact of the events and that, with the cost-of-living rise, many people were less able to afford to spend money on the income-generating elements of the events, such as food and drink stalls and funfairs. She informed Members about alternative events which were being provided throughout the winter period, which had included the provision of free or low-cost food. She reported that

she could provide details of the events broken down by localities. She advised that not having to plan and prepare for the Bonfire Night events had enabled Parks staff to focus on engaging with local residents and raising quality standards but that the decision would be reviewed for 2023. In response to a Member's question, she confirmed that the Council had previously applied for and received a grant of £10,000 from GMFRS towards safely putting on Bonfire Night events but that, if the Council had applied for the grant for 2022, they would only have been able to bid for £5,000.

In response to a Member's question, the Head of Compliance, Enforcement, and Community Safety reported that it was difficult to establish whether there was a causal link between anti-social behaviour and official Bonfire Night displays being held but that, when the full figures for 2022 were available, officers would be able to undertake a more detailed analysis. She reported that her service had undertaken visits to fireworks retailers but had received no complaints this year of under-age sales. She advised that test purchases would be undertaken at any retailers for which they received complaints about under-age sales. She reported that her service would use the analysis of the data from 2022 to identify areas where there were higher levels of firework incidents and look at fireworks retailers in those areas.

Paula Lyons reported that a range of factors, such as the weather, impacted on the level of incidents around Bonfire Night and that GMFRS had increased its community intervention with schools in the build-up to Bonfire Night 2022 which could have impacted on the number of incidents.

The Chair reported that residents in her ward had been disappointed not to have a Bonfire Night display in their local park but that, instead, a well-attended and well-received event had taken place in the run-up to Christmas. She thanked officers for putting on that event and requested that a similar event take place in 2023.

The Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods reported that it had been a difficult decision not to go ahead with the official Bonfire Night displays in 2022 but that it had been the right decision, based on the information so far, although they were still waiting for all the data to be available to make a full evaluation. She outlined the considerable amount of work over months involving different Council services and partners to put on safe, funded Bonfire Night events. She informed Members that work was taking place to ensure that there were other activities in parks and ensure that parks were used all year round. She advised that young people did not always feel safe on Bonfire Night and that the Council was looking to put alternative events in place and she encouraged Members to contact her with any suggestions they had. She offered to provide a further update at an appropriate time.

The Chair recognised the hard work of officers and thanked GMP and GMFRS for all their work to keep Manchester residents safe.

Decision

To note the report.

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Housing Operations which provided an overview of the advice services within the city. It detailed the range of provision across the city and outlined the outcomes achieved through the advice contracts that the Council commissioned. It articulated the pressures that were increasing for all advice providers in serving Manchester's population and explained the offer that other advice providers gave, including the Council's retained advice service and Registered Providers provision.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- An overview of the advice services in Manchester;
- Advice demand, trends, and pressures, including the impact of cost-of-living rises;
- The impact of the City Wide Advice Service contract, including social value and tackling inequalities;
- Manchester Advice Forum;
- The response to COVID-19; and
- Future demand and delivery.

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

- To praise the work of advice workers and their tenacity in contacting companies to seek a resolution;
- That the problems residents were contacting Ward Councillors about were increasingly complex and it would be helpful for Members to be provided with some guidance or training on where best to signpost residents depending on the situations they needed advice on;
- Access to advice services for people who were working during the day;
- To note that trade unions provided advice on employment issues to their members and to encourage workers to join a trade union; and
- How the locations for the Mobile Advice Van were communicated.

The Strategic Lead for Homelessness agreed to work with advice organisations to arrange training for Members. She reported that work had taken place to improve digital access to advice outside of office hours, including a digital chatbox. She advised that over the next year the Council would be reviewing what was needed in terms of advice services, in preparation for putting in place a new contract from 2024, and that this would include consideration about what was needed in terms of advice access on evenings and weekends.

In response to the Member's question about the Mobile Advice Van, the Service Manager (Homelessness) reported that Citizens Advice had targeted publicity in the areas where the Advice Van was visiting and that she would speak to Citizens Advice and the Council's Communications Team about improving communication in regards to this, if Members were not seeing this information. The Member stated that the Advice Van might not currently be visiting her ward but that it would be useful if it did. The Deputy Leader advised that Members could suggest to Citizens Advice any locations that they felt that the Advice Van should visit via their website, or through her or the Service Manager.

In response to a question from the Chair, the Strategic Lead for Homelessness advised that retained advice services were within the Adult Social Care Directorate. She informed the Committee that representatives from a core group of services were meeting to look at how best to serve the demands arising from the cost-of-living crisis. The Deputy Leader reported that an additional £200,000 would be spent in 2023/24 to give additional capacity to advice services in response to the cost-of-living crisis.

The Chair welcomed the work taking place and asked that the Committee's thanks be passed on to all those providing advice services across the city.

Decisions

1. To receive an update at an appropriate time.
2. To request that Ward Councillors be provided with training on signposting residents to advice services.

[Councillor Wilson declared a disclosable pecuniary interest as an employee of the Trussell Trust and left the room for this item.]

CESC/23/5 Overview Report

A report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit was submitted. The overview report contained a list of key decisions yet to be taken within the Committee's remit, responses to previous recommendations and the Committee's work programme, which the Committee was asked to approve.

The Chair proposed that the Committee receive the update report on Homelessness in either May or June 2023 and requested that Committee Members be provided with a briefing note on the analysis of the information on Bonfire Night 2022, when this was available.

Decision

To note the report and agree the work programme, subject to the above comments.