

Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 20 June 2023

Present:

Councillor Hitchen (Chair) – in the Chair

Councillors Azra Ali, Appleby, Good, Ogunbambo, Priest, Rawson, Sheikh and Wills

Also present:

Councillor Midgley, Deputy Leader

Apologies: Councillor Whiston

CESC/23/22 Interests

Councillor Priest declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest in item 8 and would remain in the meeting.

CESC/23/23 Minutes

The Chair requested an update on a recommendation made at the previous meeting which requested that the Committee's concerns be included in the Council and Greater Manchester responses, through a letter from the Committee to the Government's plans to temporarily exempt asylum accommodation from HMO licensing requirements. In response, the committee was advised that this was currently being drafted and discussions on the detail and wording of the letter had taken place. This would be progressed outside of the meeting and a further update provided to the next meeting.

Decision:

That the minutes of the previous meeting, held on 23 May 2023, be approved as a correct record.

CESC/23/24 Update report on the Homelessness Service

The committee received a report of the Director of Housing Services which provided an update on the Council's Homelessness Service and the improvement and transformation happening across the service in an increasingly challenging social and economic context.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- The key metrics for the Homelessness Service;
- The progress made to reduce bed and breakfast placements, especially for families, and wider temporary accommodation placements that have been achieved since last discussed at the meeting in January 2023;
- Changes to the Manchester Allocation of Social Housing Policy;

- Accessing the homelessness service;
- Leasing schemes including for families;
- Support available for housing-related issues and domestic abuse;
- The Rough Sleeping Accommodation Programme (RSAP) and the Single Homelessness Accommodation Programme (SHAP) and
- An ongoing review of the Council's Homelessness Strategy.

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

- Welcoming the reduction in the number of families placed in bed and breakfasts for temporary accommodation;
- The support available for those facing or experiencing homelessness where English was not their first language;
- Requesting a breakdown by gender and gender identity of those in temporary accommodation;
- Commending the cross-Council approach of the service;
- Where around 400 properties to be used in three leasing schemes would be located in the city;
- How much money had been saved by reducing the use of bed and breakfast placements for temporary accommodation;
- Requesting that a future report included further explanation as to why a high percentage of Black people faced and experienced homelessness;
- Welcoming the work undertaken with Manchester Communications Academy, and querying whether this could be rolled out to other schools within the city;
- Whether any extra resources were needed for the Housing Options team;
- Requesting further information on payments to providers for rent, repair, and furniture allowance under the temporary accommodation leasing scheme;
- The support provided to those placed in temporary accommodation outside of Greater Manchester;
- The support available to residents in areas where temporary accommodation is located;
- How the voluntary sector was involved in the Council's outreach approach, and what the Homeless Partnership was;
- Noting that Manchester had a higher percentage of people facing or experiencing homelessness compared to other Greater Manchester authorities, and querying why this was; and
- The proposed timeframe for ending the use of bed and breakfast placements as temporary accommodation.

The Deputy Leader highlighted the ongoing good work to reduce the number of rough sleepers in Manchester and the turnaround in the number of people, particularly families, being temporarily placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. She explained that there were currently two families who had been in bed and breakfast accommodation for over six weeks, compared to 131 when last reported, and one family placed outside of Greater Manchester, compared to 92 previously. She stated that the Council continued to focus on preventing homelessness and reducing the number of people in temporary accommodation.

The Assistant Director of Homelessness stated that bed and breakfast placements could never be suitable for homeless families and explained that the law stipulated that such placements should only be used in exceptional circumstances and for no longer than six weeks. He stated that the number of people in temporary accommodation peaked in February 2023, with 814 households in bed and breakfast placements. There were currently 241 households in bed and breakfasts, of which 227 of these were families.

In response to queries, the committee was informed that the Council had Right to Protect (RTOP) workers who worked specifically with refugees to prevent homelessness. The Strategic Lead for Homelessness also explained that support included Language Line, dual-language support workers and interpreters, and that the Council recognised that some residents may have additional needs and cultural differences. She explained that additional visits were undertaken to address these needs and to highlight any difficulties and additional help that may be required. Members were also informed that any information provided to those presenting as homeless could be translated and could be provided in simple written English and through visually accessible provision, although the Strategic Lead for Homelessness stated that this would be looked into further outside of the meeting.

It was also clarified that appropriate interpreters would be provided for British Sign Language speakers.

A breakdown of those in temporary accommodation by gender and gender identity requested by members would be provided following the meeting.

The Assistant Director of Homelessness stated that the short-term leasing scheme initially intended to provide 200 units of temporary accommodation for families as there were 227 families in bed and breakfast placements. He explained that it was unlikely that 200 family-sized units would be required as the number in bed and breakfast accommodation had reduced significantly. He further stated that discussions were ongoing with housing associations to manage 140 longer-term tenancies and 50 units for rough sleepers. Many of these properties were empty and would be brought back into the market with improvements and would be intensively managed.

The Assistant Director of Homelessness stated that there needed to be a better spread of temporary accommodation across the city, particularly in south Manchester. The Strategic Lead for Homelessness noted that the Council looked to keep new properties away from areas with existing temporary and dispersed accommodation and highlighted the example of Etrop Grange in south Manchester, which provided accommodation for rough sleepers. It was explained that the new temporary accommodation units were still being procured and detail of where these were located could be provided when available.

The Director of Housing Services stated that a £4million reduction in expenditure on bed and breakfast placements had been factored into the service's budget for 2023/24 and he was confident that this would be met.

In response to a query regarding why a high percentage of Black people faced and experienced homelessness, the Director of Housing Services acknowledged this stark figure and informed the committee that the service was working closely with the Making Manchester Fairer team to reduce inequalities.

The Strategic Lead for Homelessness noted the excellent work undertaken by Manchester Communications Academy and stated that the Homelessness service wanted to work closely with colleagues in Education to share best practice and learning and roll this out more widely across the city. She also stated that the service wanted to visit core cities and other forums that the Council worked with through the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to showcase this work.

The Deputy Leader explained that she had visited Manchester Communications Academy earlier in the week and praised the work of the school.

In response to a member's query regarding whether any extra resources were needed for the Housing Options team, the Assistant Director of Homelessness explained that there were a number of vacancies in the Housing Solutions team which impacted upon telephone performance and homeless prevention. He stated that 12 new employees were due to start their roles imminently and that a second round of recruitment would be undertaken shortly with a goal of recruiting an additional 20 staff members in total to be in post within a few months. He hoped that this would strengthen the Council's ability to prevent homelessness moving forward.

Members were advised that there was a definite value within the rental charge that the Council would pay for repairs and furniture. Exact figures would be provided following the meeting.

In response to a question regarding the support provided to those placed in temporary accommodation outside of Greater Manchester, the Assistant Director of Homelessness advised that there was currently one family placed outside of Greater Manchester and that the Council's Housing Support Service would continue to provide assistance as they would for families in temporary accommodation within Greater Manchester. He stated that discussions had taken place with colleagues in Children's Services to ensure that timely referrals could be made to social care services in the local authority area where a family was temporarily placed.

The Assistant Director of Homelessness also explained that temporary accommodation managers engaged with local residents in areas where temporary accommodation was located. He acknowledged that there was further work to be done in this area.

The committee was informed that the core outreach service for rough sleepers was a Council-ran service but there were also several external outreach services, such as Outreach in the Community in south Manchester, which provided indoor day centres and played a key role in assisting the Council. He noted that the Council was less advanced in engaging with the third sector in their work with homeless families, compared to rough sleepers, but this would be addressed in the development of the Homelessness Strategy.

The Assistant Director of Homelessness praised the work and commitment of the Manchester Homeless Partnership and explained that several senior officers within the voluntary sector were appointed to different Partnership boards and could influence how services were delivered in Manchester. The Strategic Lead for Homelessness expanded on this and explained that there were several action and task-and-finish groups within the Partnership whose members had lived experiences of homelessness. These groups shared ideas and good practice with the Council and other stakeholders.

In response to a point raised that Manchester had a higher percentage of people facing or experiencing homelessness compared to other Greater Manchester authorities, the Assistant Director of Homelessness suggested that other Greater Manchester authorities were not directly comparative with Manchester's figures and stated that the amount of homelessness was rising across the country in comparison to Manchester, where numbers were decreasing. Members suggested that Manchester's homeless statistics should instead be benchmarked against other core cities such as Leeds and Birmingham.

Members were also advised that there was no set timescale for ending the use of bed and breakfast placements as temporary accommodation as this practice was unlawful and needed to be brought to an end at the earliest opportunity.

The Chair thanked officers for their work and requested that this be relayed to the wider Homelessness service.

Decision:

That the committee

1. notes the report;
2. requests that a future update report on homelessness include explanation as to why high numbers of BAME residents experience homelessness;
3. requests that further information on the location of leasing scheme properties be provided when available; and

4. requests that a future report be provided to the committee on the support provided to communities in areas where leasing scheme properties will be located.

CESC/23/25 Draft Terms of Reference for Anti-Social Behaviour Task and Finish Group

The committee received draft terms of reference for a Task and Finish group on crime and disorder, which the committee indicated they wished to establish.

Members discussed and made suggestions on the objectives, scope, and key lines of enquiry for the Task and Finish Group and put forward nominations for membership.

The final terms of reference would be presented at the first meeting of the Task and Finish Group.

Decision:

That

1. the committee agrees to establish a Task and Finish Group on crime and disorder, and
2. the membership of this Task and Finish Group consists of Councillors Hitchen, Azra Ali, Appleby, Doswell, Good, Ogunbambo, Sheikh and Wills.

CESC/23/26 Overview Report

The committee considered a report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit which 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.

Decision:

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

CESC/23/27 Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Infrastructure Contract Update (PART A)

The committee received a report of the Assistant Chief Executive which provided an update on the review of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) infrastructure contract and subsequent process taken for the contract in preparation for re-procurement in 2023.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- An introduction to the VCSE sector in Manchester and background to the infrastructure contract;
- Key findings of the external, independent review into Manchester's VCSE support provision;
- Development of the new infrastructure specification, which would identify four main areas of support; and
- The timeline and next steps for the infrastructure review.

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

- Who the Commissioners of the contract would be, and whether this would include people from the BAME community;
- How new VCSE organisations could access support through Manchester Community Central (Macc)
- How the Council could support smaller VCSE organisations, particularly with evaluation of the projects they deliver;
- How the Council could support organisations with bid-writing and other skills;
- How the Infrastructure Contract will address and target poverty and lack of access to services;
- How BAME VCSE organisations would be supported;
- Noting that smaller VCSE organisations often had large overhead costs, and querying whether funding would be provided in instalments or as an up-front lump sum;
- Whether the new Infrastructure Contract would form part of the additional £120k allocated for the development of VCSE organisations amongst BAME community groups; and
- Suggesting that the Council provide support for smaller VCSE organisations to become sub-contractors to other providers.

The Deputy Leader introduced the item and explained that the VCSE Infrastructure Contract had been in place for over 10 years, which strengthened the local VCSE sector, and she expressed her thanks to the Policy and Programmes Manager (Communities and VCSE) and his team for their work on the Contract.

The Assistant Chief Executive stated that infrastructure support provided partnership and practical support to VCSE organisations around volunteering opportunities, developing connections between organisations, and advocated for the sector. He explained that the current Infrastructure Contract was awarded to Macc and was jointly funded by the Council and NHS, who had committed their involvement for the current financial year. Discussions with the NHS were ongoing regarding future funding.

He explained that, as part of the review into the new infrastructure specification, the Council was trying to respond to the experiences, feedback, and priorities of the VCSE sector and that there had been significant consultation on this. An independent review had also been undertaken, which recognised that the sector wanted a greater focus on capacity-building and practical support for their organisations. There would

also be a focus on ensuring that the support offered by the provider was accessible and culturally appropriate for all communities. Feedback from the sector also indicated that there needed to be greater support in specific areas of the city, such as North Manchester and parts of East Manchester where the sector was less developed.

The Assistant Chief Executive also stated that further member engagement on the Infrastructure Contract was proposed and that members had been invited to a meeting on this taking place in the following week.

In response to a member's query, it was advised that a group of officers would be responsible for awarding the Infrastructure Contract and this group would be representative of different backgrounds and protected characteristics.

The Policy and Programmes Manager (Communities and VCSE) provided assurances that Macc was publicly accessible to all VCSE organisations with tiered and general offers to groups. Membership to Macc was also open to all VCSE organisations. The Deputy Leader explained that organisations could book 15-minute sessions online to learn more about the services provided and to begin the process of receiving a tailored support package.

The Assistant Chief Executive stated that the Our Manchester VCSE process was the main grant funding administered by the Council, but other grants were also available. He stated that this funding had been awarded to small, medium, and large VCSE organisations but he recognised that larger organisations could have access to more funding opportunities and had more resources at their disposal compared to smaller groups.

In response to a query regarding how the Council could support organisations to improve skills, the Policy and Programmes Manager (Communities and VCSE) explained that the Council liaised with organisations in receipt of the Our Manchester VCSE Fund or Supporting Communities Fund upon receipt of their monitoring information to support their evaluations and the standard of information provided. The Assistant Chief Executive welcomed the point around evaluation raised by the member and stated that officers would take this forward during procurement discussions.

The Assistant Chief Executive explained that the infrastructure support provider would be required to undertake targeted work in areas of the city which experienced poverty and had less access to services. He cited the work of North Manchester Together as a good example of how the VCSE sector can be developed in certain areas.

The committee was advised that Our Manchester VCSE funding would be provided in instalments over 3 years with annual delivery monitoring. The Infrastructure Contract funding would also be provided in instalments over a 5-year period.

In response to the Chair's enquiry regarding how the Council could support organisations with bid-writing and other skills, the Policy and Programmes Manager (Communities and VCSE) stated that there was a strong emphasis within the review of the specification to acknowledge feedback from the sector and to meet their needs. Bid-writing and fundraising would be included in this work and there would be an encouragement of partnership working to extend provisions into difficult-to-reach communities. The Assistant Chief Executive stated that providing targeted support for BAME-led and BAME-focused organisations was also an important part of the infrastructure contract specification. He explained that £120k had been allocated to a Development Fund to help these groups to develop VCSE organisations, which was separate to the Infrastructure Contract.

The Assistant Chief Executive stated that advice for smaller VCSE organisations on how to become sub-contractors for other providers could be provided through business development support, which the provider would be expected to undertake.

Decision:

That the report be noted.

CESC/23/28 Exclusion of Press and Public

Decision:

That the press and public be excluded during consideration of the following item which involved consideration of exempt information relating to the financial or business affairs of particular persons and public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

CESC/23/29 Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Infrastructure Contract Update (PART B)

The committee received a confidential report of the Assistant Chief Executive which provided supplementary information to item 8.

Members discussed the current Infrastructure Specification and considered the proposed inclusions in the revised Specification, including the purpose and outcomes of the Specification and the service and monitoring requirements.

Decision:

That the supplementary information be noted.