

Environment, Climate Change and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 8 February 2024

Present:

Councillor Shilton Godwin – in the Chair
Councillors Chohan, Collins, Holt, Ilyas, McCaul, Razaq, Wiest and Wright

Also present:

Councillor Rawlins, Executive Member for Environment and Transport
Councillor Foley, Deputy Executive Member for Environment and Transport
Councillor Igbon, Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods
Councillor Akbar, Executive Member for Finance and Resources

ECCNSC/24/7 Minutes

Decision

To approve the minutes of the Environment and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 11 January 2024 as a correct record.

ECCNSC/24/8 Budget 2024/25

The Committee considered the report of the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer that described sets out the latest forecast revenue budget position, and the next steps. Following the Provisional Finance Settlement announced 18 December 2023 the Council is forecasting an estimated budget shortfall of £38m in 2024/25, £79m in 2025/26, and £90m by 2026/27. After the application of approved and planned savings, and the use of c.£17m smoothing reserves in each of the three years, the budget is balanced for 2024/25 and the remaining gap reduce to £29m in 2025/26 and £41m by 2026/27. This position assumes that savings of £21.4m were delivered next year.

This report provided a high-level overview of the updated budget position. Each scrutiny committee was invited to consider the current proposed changes which were within its remit and to make recommendations to the Executive before it agrees the final budget proposals on 14 February 2024.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources stated that the Government's approach to the Local Government Settlement had been chaotic and only announced just before Christmas. He said the final announcement when announced had resulted in a cut of 84% in the Services Grant and this equated to a £6.1m cut for Manchester. He stated that this had resulted in an outcry from Local Authorities and MPs from all political parties. He stated that this situation needed to be understood in the context of fourteen years of austerity and Government funding cuts and unfunded pressures such as inflation and population growth.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources added that the Government then swiftly announced an additional £500m for Social Care, however Local Authorities

were still facing a £4bn budget gap nationally, resulting in a number of Local Authorities serving a Section 144 notice and it was anticipated that more would follow.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources commented that despite this Manchester had set a balanced budget and had been achieved through diligent planning and management that had witnessed the strategic investment in preventative initiatives; using financial reserves prudently and investment in activities that were important for Manchester residents, such as libraries; leisure centres; parks and green spaces and the Climate Change Action Plan.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources stated that although Manchester had been able to deliver a balanced budget this year, the Council's financial position is expected to become even more challenging. The projected budget gap, even after using reserves for 25/26 was £29m in 2025/26 and rising to £41m by 2026/27, adding that since 2010 the Council has had to make £443m.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources concluded by stating that the Government had continually failed to listen to Local Authorities.

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

- The financial situation imposed on Manchester continued to be bleak, noting that the report clearly articulated the scale of the challenge the Council faced to deliver services for Manchester residents; and
- Was there a possibility that Manchester would have to issue a 114 Notice in 2027 based on the projected budget position and the use of reserves.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources stated that unlike many other local authorities Manchester was able to deliver a balanced budget, however commented that once the financial reserves had been exhausted and without adequate funding arrangements in future years some difficult and unpalatable decisions would have to be taken. He stated that the serving of a 114 Notice could be catastrophic for a Council and severely constrained what they could spend on other than statutory services. He commented that Manchester Council remained committed to addressing the climate crisis and to become net zero by 2038.

Neighbourhoods Directorate Budget 2024/25

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) that set out a service overview and key priorities including an update on the Climate Action Plan, along with the latest draft budgets for the services within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Neighbourhood Services Directorate had an overall gross budget of £262m and a net budget of £139.225m. The Directorate employed 1,916 full-time equivalent (fte). The budgets which fell under the remit of this Committee had a gross budget of £82.248m, net budgets of £73.801m and a fte of 400;

- Savings of £0.5m had already been approved for 2024/27 as part of prior year budget approvals and these remained on track to be delivered;
- As part of the 2023/24 budget process savings were identified over a three-year period and it was intended that the 2024/25 budget would be light touch and no further savings would be required. In light of the current financial years pressures and ongoing high inflation rates it had been necessary to revisit the initial assumptions and identify further savings options for consideration;
- Noting that it was proposed that some external charges were increased by up to 5% from 1st April, and as part of these increases' additional income of £132k was forecast from across the services within the remit of this Committee and this had been reflected within the overall budget as part of the £1m increased income from sales fees and charges;
- As part of the budget proposals an initial £0.9m investment into waste and street cleaning was proposed for 2024/25, this would provide £0.4m investment into waste collection and disposal to provide resources to meet increased demographic needs because of increased numbers of dwellings across the City that would require additional collection rounds;
- £400k of investment is proposed for Street Cleaning which recognises the stepped increase in population and footfall whilst providing the ability to deal with hotspots, and £100k to deal with the accumulation of waste on Council land proactive cleansing of land to prevent fly tipping and there is a further £300k in 2026/27;
- The annual waste levy costs were driven by forecast tonnages of waste to be disposed of and the costs of disposal. The levy was set by GMCA and based on latest forecasts it is anticipated that this will increase in 2024/25, with the increase to Manchester being £1.532m. Further increases of £1.480m had been assumed for 2025/26 and £1.009m for 2026/27, these increases were reflected in the current budget plans for those years; and
- Future opportunities, risks and policy considerations, noting that as development continued across the city, this may lead to increased growth pressures for Neighbourhood Services as the number of households grows significantly. There was some funding proposed within the current budget proposals for both waste collection and street cleansing, but the increase demand was likely to also extend to enforcement, parks, leisure and wider neighbourhood working.

The Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods stated that Neighbourhood Services had been under significant financial pressures since 2010 as a result of unfair budget settlements imposed on Manchester. She described that in despite of this Manchester had continued to invest in the city and made specific reference to the Neighbourhood Investment Fund that supported activities that were important for residents and their neighbourhood. She concluded by calling on the Government for increased funding for Manchester.

The Executive Member for Environment and Transport reiterated the previous comments made regarding the failure of Government to adequately fund Manchester over many years and the significant challenge this had each year to deliver a balanced budget. She stated that despite this Manchester had invested in the team to support the Climate Change Action Plan and staff were able to submit bids and applications for pots of grant funding as and when they became available. In response to a specific question as to how many hours were spent drafting and

submitting fund applications, she said that this would be provided after the meeting, however acknowledged the wider point raised regarding these unsustainable funding arrangements. She stated that the investment in the Power Purchase Agreement that had previously been reported to the Committee demonstrated the ongoing commitment to delivering on the Councils pledge to address the climate crisis.

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

- Noting and welcoming the previous decisions taken to invest in capacity to tackle the climate crisis;
- Welcoming the £400k of investment proposed for Street Cleaning which recognised the stepped increase in population and footfall whilst providing the ability to deal with hotspots, and £100k to deal with the accumulation of waste on Council land, proactive cleansing of land to prevent fly tipping and the further £300k in 2026/27;
- Further clarification was sought in relation to the budget for staffing costs in light of high levels of turnover and allowing for all posts at top of grade;
- Were the projected income to be generated from Parks and Open Spaces realistic;
- Recognising the pressure the staff working in Neighbourhood Teams were under; and
- The need to acknowledge increased visitor numbers to the city centre.

The Head of Finance, Corporate Core stated that the further information regarding staffing posts would be circulated following the meeting, adding that the staffing underspends across all Council Directorates were because of a combination of ongoing vacant posts (12 months plus), the high number of part time posts and staff not being at the top of the grades.

The Director of Neighbourhood Delivery stated that the section relating to income generation and Parks and Open Spaces was evidence based, calculated on previous activities. He stated that all commercial activities and opportunities would be considered to maximise income. He further commented that consideration was given to the increased number of visitors to the city centre and noted the conversations with local elected Members that were ongoing on this issue.

Decision

To note the reports.

ECCNSC/24/9 Update on delivery of the Parks Climate Change Action Plan

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) that provided an update on the implementation and the delivery of the Parks Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP) since the last report to the Environment and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee on 9 March 2023.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background;

- Describing that the Parks CCAP went live on 1 April 2023;
- Describing process against the actions; and
- Conclusions and next steps.

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

- The need for the Council to use all available levers to influence other owners of green space to adopt a similar approach to their management of green space and public realm;
- Consideration needed to be given to improving access and connectivity between parks;
- All projects and schemes to increase cycling and active travel should be actively promoted across the parks estate;
- 'Walk and wheel' in parks was important and should be promoted in parks, with appropriate consideration given to access;
- Had consideration been given to installing recycling bins in parks;
- What was the approach to grass cutting in parks, noting the conflict that could arise between different users and their expectations regarding the use and purpose of green space, particularly the attempts to promote and encourage biodiversity;
- The starting point for drafting any park plan should be the wishes and ambitions of local residents, especially in regard to increasing biodiversity;
- The approach to grass cutting and the promotion of biodiversity needed to be established for each individual park and these plans needed to be available and communicated to residents so as to manage expectations;
- What was the approach to Single Use Plastics for events held in parks;
- Discussing of lighting in parks;
- Noting that parks and green spaces often were subject to flooding due to adjacent grey infrastructure; and
- Was consideration been given to installing electric vehicle charging points in parks.

The Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods stated that there was an ongoing commitment from the service to deliver this work, noting that addressing climate change was now a priority for all Directorates across the Council. She stated that as a result of continued budget pressures the parks service had lost a significant number of staff over the previous years. She said that a business case was being developed for additional staffing resources and she thanked the staff working across the teams for their continued hard work on behalf of the residents of the city.

The Parks Lead said that the establishment of the Parks Climate Change Action Plan was a mechanism that could be used to influence partners and other stakeholders across the city. She described that this Plan had also been shared, along with the learning from this approach with colleges across Greater Manchester.

The Parks Lead said that opportunities for a wider role out of the Bee Network Cycle Hire scheme across all parks were being explored as this would support the call for increased sustainable travel. The Director of Neighbourhood Delivery commented that as Manchester had been awarded the status of European Capital of Cycling this

would increase opportunities to deliver more sustainable and safe travel options for residents.

The Parks Lead informed the Committee that all waste collected in bins in parks was sorted and recycled, however she noted that consideration needed to be given as to how this was better communicated to residents.

The Parks Lead stated that they did work with Friends of Parks Groups to discuss landscape management. She added that engagement with all stakeholders was important to develop park plans and the subsequent wider communication of these. She noted the comments regarding the tensions and expectations amongst different park users and landscape management and added that appropriate mapping and interpretation of parks needed to be clearly available. She described that there were 143 parks in the city, and all had a unique personality and characteristics. She stated that there was a lot of biodiversity already supported through these parks and the intention was to scale this up with consideration given to achieving the correct balance for all park users.

The report stated that avoidable single use plastics used by contracted partners had been eradicated across the park's estate. This had been achieved by working with these contracted partners, predominantly the cafe and ice cream operators in parks to ensure that they did not sell or use single use plastics, and this was included as a condition within the contracts and in the new tender documents that were currently out to offers. The Parks Lead informed the Committee that for larger events (3000 plus) organisers had to submit an Environmental Impact Evaluation and the department worked with organisers to mitigate the use of plastics, such as introducing reusable cup hire schemes.

The Parks Lead said that due to historical lighting contract arrangements each park had a different contract management standard. She added that installation of any additional lighting would be subject to an environmental impact assessment and the perceptions of safety was also considered, noting comments made regarding the importance of female safety in parks.

The Parks Lead acknowledged that people visiting parks had different access needs and this was understood. She commented that there were many different volunteer-led projects delivered in parks and the volunteers were reflective of the local community. She said that actions to remove physical barriers to accessing parks was being undertaken so as to encourage all residents to use and benefit from visiting parks. The Director of Neighbourhood Delivery reiterated that parks and green spaces were important for health and wellbeing and were being used to support social prescribing and the Parks teams also worked with Manchester Active to promote the health benefits and opportunities offered in parks.

The Parks Lead said that grey and green projects needed to be coordinated with the appropriate consideration given to flood mitigation and management. Regarding electric vehicle charging points, she said that consideration would be given to how this could be rolled out.

Decision

To note the report.

ECCNSC/24/10 Update on Manchester's Park Strategy 2017-2027

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) that provided an update on the progress of delivering Manchester's Park Strategy and an overview of the approach to develop a refreshed delivery plan to guide the future investment, upkeep and activation of Manchester's Parks.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background;
- Describing the 4 key themes of the ten-year strategy for Manchester's Parks that was launched in December 2017;
- Noting the impact of the pandemic and the value of parks;
- Data and information on the event and activity programme;
- Budget related data;
- Describing progress to date against the 4 key themes;
- Information relating to the Parks Development Programme (PDP);
- Discussion of the new challenges and opportunities;
- Describing the new delivery plan, titled "Our Parks, Our Plan" (2024 – 2027);
- Delivery of the plan, noting that where linkages existed to other relevant strategies such as the Council's Climate Change Action Plan, a joint approach to delivery and monitoring would take place; and
- Next steps.

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

- Thanking the staff working across the parks teams;
- Tennis courts and charging, and had consideration been given to maximising access in deprived areas;
- Reiterating the importance of female safety in parks;
- Noting the work of Friends of Parks Groups and adding that consultation needed to be undertaken with the wider community;
- Noting the information provided in regard to mowing; and
- How were sites for 'pocket parks' identified.

The Director of Neighbourhood Delivery stated that Manchester was working with children's charity, the UK committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) to become a Child Friendly City. He stated that consultation with children and young people and the Youth Council had confirmed that Place and parks were an important priority as part of a safe, secure and healthy city. He stated that this feedback had helped shape the emerging Our Parks, Our Plan.

The Parks Lead commented that each headline action of the Our Parks, Our Plan would have a number of associated sub actions and that all key stakeholders would be consulted with as this is progressed, noting the importance of capturing all voices.

The Parks Lead said that the charging model applied to tennis courts provided revenue to maintain these facilities. She said that the app used to book these courts enabled accurate monitoring and analysis of use. She said that affordability had been considered and off peak times were available.

The Parks Lead said that female safety in parks was understood and acknowledged. She said that all relevant national guidance and best practice surrounding this issue was applied. She commented that the work and actions surrounding female safety in parks had been audited and scrutinised by the Safety of Women and Girls Steering Group.

The Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods stated that community safety in parks was taken very seriously, adding that the Council was a White Ribbon accredited organisation. She added that a pilot project with local school children had been undertaken to understand the issues of safety and parks and the learning from this would be utilised.

The Parks Lead discussed the issue of lighting in parks and made reference again to the different historic contract arrangements that existed. She commented that the intention was to establish a set of standard principles regarding lighting and added that the issues of safety could be used as a lever to increase the provision of lighting in specific locations.

The Strategy Manager, Parks advised that differential mowing regimes were implemented in Birchfields, Chorlton and Platt Fields Park during 2023. This approach was being further developed with feasibility works underway to identify additional locations, with consideration being given to resident and visitor engagement.

The Parks Lead said that the Department worked closely with all strategic developments across the city, referencing the Northern Gateway and Victoria North developments, with the intention to maximise all opportunities to deliver green space with appropriate consideration given to connectivity and active travel.

The Parks Lead commented that for those larger events held in parks there was a need to balance such use against the benefits that could be realised from hosting these. She commented that revenue generated from these events could be directed back to local Friends Groups and other associated groups to support initiatives and projects delivered in parks. She advised that there was a strategic approach to the investment in parks and this included income generation.

With regard to the discussion of access to parks, noting comments raised regarding anti-social behaviour arising from the use of off-road motorbikes, the Parks Lead said that an audit against access standards would be undertaken, and best practice would be adopted to maximise access.

Decision

To note the report.

ECCNSC/24/11 Bereavement Services - Cemetery and Crematorium Climate Change Action Plan

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) that provided an overview of the Bereavement Services Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP). The report provided the background to the development of the plan, how this aligned with wider ambitions of the Council, along with an overview of the action plan.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background;
- An overview of the Bereavement Services CCAP;
- Describing the actions identified in each workstream of the CCAP; and
- Conclusions and next steps.

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

- What was the capacity for woodland burials;
- Supporting the aspiration for Southern Cemetery to be considered as a nature reserve;
- Welcoming the establishment of individual biodiversity plans and this model should be adopted across all parks;
- Travel plans and accessibility to sites, noting the issue of parking on neighbouring streets; and
- Had there been any consideration given to alternative sustainable methods of burial.

The Strategic Lead stated that the Parks Climate Change Action Plan had been used as a template to develop the Cemetery and Crematorium Climate Change Action Plan. She recognised and paid tribute to all the staff who had been involved in developing the plan for their dedication and effort. She said that the Plan was not a static document but rather a live and dynamic plan that would be reviewed and updated appropriately.

The Bereavement Services Manager stated that currently there were two locations to facilitate woodland burials and capacity existed at these sites. She commented that if these sites reached their capacity appropriate alternative locations would be identified.

The Bereavement Services Manager acknowledged the comments expressed regarding the impact on-street parking had on neighbouring streets. She stated that there was a lot of available onsite parking at Southern Cemetery and that conversations were ongoing with local Neighbourhood Teams and the private operator of the crematorium to seek solutions to address issues of inappropriate parking.

The Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods acknowledged the issue of car parking and the detrimental impact and disruption this could have on

neighbourhoods. She said the establishment of travel plans would assist in addressing such issues, however she noted that this would need to be done sensitively.

The Bereavement Services Manager welcomed the support from the Committee for Southern Cemetery to be considered as a nature reserve. The Director of Neighbourhood Delivery reiterated the importance of this to act as a green corridor to support biodiversity.

The Bereavement Services Manager informed the Committee that alternatives to burials and cremations were considered, however this was in the very early stages.

The Chair thanked officers for accommodating a recent visit by Members to Blackley Crematorium. She said that this had been very informative. The Bereavement Services Manager stated that she would accommodate visits to other sites should Members request this.

The Chair concluded this item of business by recognising this pioneering Cemetery and Crematorium Climate Change Action Plan, adding that no other Council had done this and thanked all officers concerned for their dedication and work in developing and delivering this Plan.

Decision

To note the report.

ECCNSC/24/12 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 Chair informed the Committee that since the Overview Report had been published, she had agreed to remove the items on Sustainable Food and Zero Carbon Culture from the March meeting. She stated that work was in progress to develop the work programme for the new municipal year and encouraged Members to contact her with any specific topics that they would like included on the work programme.

Decision

The Committee notes the report and agrees the work programme, noting the comments above.