

Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 21 May 2024

Present:

Councillor Hitchen (Chair) – in the Chair

Councillors Appleby, Bell, Y Dar, Doswell, Good, Ogunbambo, Rawson, Ludford, Sheikh and Whiston

Also present:

Councillor Midgley, Deputy Leader

Sarah Paul, Homelessness Prevention Lead, Greater Manchester Probation Service

Kerry Schofield, Greater Manchester Probation Service

Apologies: Councillors Azra Ali and Iqbal

CESC/24/22 Interests

Councillor Dar declared a prejudicial interest in item 5 and left the meeting for the duration of the item.

CESC/24/23 Minutes

Decision: That the minutes of the meeting held on 5 March 2024 be approved as a correct record.

CESC/24/24 Support for People Leaving Prison

The committee considered a report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) which provided an update on the probation reset detailed in the Written Ministerial Statement to Parliament in April and provided an overview of the accommodation and support provided for people who have left prison and links with the homeless service.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background;
- The probation reset, which was implemented on 29 April 2024 and aimed to prioritise engagement and supervision at points in an individual's sentence where it has the most impact for those on probation;
- The work of the Housing Solutions Service in responding to individuals leaving custody with no settled accommodation;
- Changes made to the Prison Discharge team's processes to improve the number of individuals who are aware of their accommodation options prior to release;
- The housing-related support available to those who require it in the short-term to re-establish and maintain independent living;
- Community Accommodation Service Tier 3 (CAS-3) accommodation;
- The Accommodation for Ex-Offenders (AfEO) programme; and
- Support available for care leavers and young people leaving custody.

Some of the key points and queries that arose from the committee's discussion included:

- The policies and risk and qualitative assessments that were undertaken at transitional accommodation for ex-offenders;
- The impact on the probation and homelessness services as a result of the recent announcement that prisoners would be eligible for release up to 70 days before the end of their sentence;
- Whether funding for CAS-3 was guaranteed after 2025;
- How the Accommodation for ex-Offenders (AfEO) programme was funded;
- If the Council was expecting additional government funding, to address the impact of the probation reset on demand for housing-related support;
- How long prison leavers stayed in transitional accommodation;
- How prison leavers were allocated to accommodation;
- How resistance to a placement from residents was managed;
- If placements were aligned to employment or education opportunities;
- If staff in the Homelessness Service, particularly the Prison Discharge team, were trauma-informed;
- How the Council engaged with prison leavers;
- What work was undertaken to support young offenders leaving custody;
- How long ex-offenders received help from the Bail Accommodation Support Service for;
- What happened to those prison leavers who were referred for private rented sector accommodation; and
- How many care leavers had been received through the Probation Service in the past 5 years and what priority they were given with regards to accommodation.

The Strategic Lead (Community Safety) explained that the report provided detail on housing-related support, community accommodation services which were funded through the Ministry of Justice and private rented accommodation for ex-offenders.

Representatives of the Greater Manchester Probation Service were in attendance at the meeting and explained that the probation reset was introduced to alleviate some workload pressures placed on sentence management through prison capacity issues and the measures introduced as a consequence of this, such as changes to end-of-custody supervised licences and a shift toward fixed-term recalls for the majority of offenders sentenced to less than 12 months in custody. It was also stated that the reset had been introduced in anticipation of further impacts from the Sentencing Bill. The reset was launched on 29 April 2024 and was anticipated to be fully implemented by 1 July 2024 with work ongoing.

Members were informed that the responsibility for managing the sentence of a court remained with the Probation Service and that offenders would continue to serve any sentence or punishment imposed by the sentencing court. The Probation Service would also continue to oversee risk management and undertake enforcement at all

stages of a sentence and would continue to work with key partners to ensure that the relevant risk information was shared.

In response to queries, the Homelessness Prevention Lead, GM Probation Service explained that standard risk assessments were undertaken for each individual leaving prison and that the Probation Service sought approvals from the police and the Council when placing a prison leaver in transitional accommodation. She explained that the police also approved the location of transitional accommodation to understand who could be safely placed in a specific area. She endeavoured to share information from the initial proposal stages of transitional accommodation and information on the structures, governance arrangements and response criteria for CAS-3 accommodation.

The committee was advised that a full assessment process was undertaken by prisons and the Probation Service to ensure an individual's suitability for early release based on their circumstances upon leaving custody. It was stated that those eligible for early release would be impacted by the probation reset but it was too early to understand the effects of this on caseloads and a review of eligible cases was underway to ensure that the service's processes were appropriate. The Strategic Lead (Homelessness) stated that the service worked closely with colleagues in the Probation Service which allowed for better management of the process and that, whilst there would be an increase in ex-offenders leaving prison earlier, this would not lead to an increase in the number of people requiring housing support.

The Homelessness Prevention Lead, GM Probation Service stated that the Ministry of Justice funded the CAS-3 programme and this was confirmed to 2025 with a +1 +1 caveat which was subject to the next government Spending Review. Members were also advised that funding for AfEO was confirmed to 2025.

In response to a query regarding whether there would be any additional funding for the Council as a result of the probation reset, the Strategic Lead (Homelessness) stated that the work of the Hospital Discharge, Homeless Assessment, Housing Solutions and housing-related support teams was partly funded by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) but that additional funding had been awarded for the CAS-3 and AfEO programmes.

The Strategic Lead (Homelessness) explained that the No Priority Need scheme enabled those to whom the Council did not have a statutory duty toward to still have accommodation upon their release from custody.

The committee was informed that, through the CAS-3 programme, there were 53 units across Manchester which were a mixture of single and shared occupancy. Members were advised that a referral process was undertaken by the Probation Service to understand the level of risk, such as proximity to schools and parks, and to identify the most appropriate placement for an individual. The Homelessness Prevention Lead, GM Probation Service stated that evidence suggested the outcomes of being placed in CAS-3 accommodation were better for those deemed to

be high-risk upon release from custody, which she stated countered the stigma attached to the nature of offending. It was explained that a contextualised risk assessment for each placement was provided to the Council, which then shared this information with other support providers.

In response to a query regarding resistance from residents, members were informed that the service had not received any specific objections to a high-risk individual being placed in the community as residents often did not know the nature of the offence and the placement of the ex-offender in their area. It was acknowledged that there had been some issues with antisocial behaviour, which were addressed in collaboration with the Council. Members noted that the location of ex-offenders was not known to the community and requested further information.

The Homelessness Prevention Lead, GM Probation Service explained that the majority of prison leavers returned to live with family and friends and that a local connection was sought when agreeing where to place a prison leaver, with individuals commonly placed in their previous area. It was noted that ex-offenders were subject to licence conditions, which could include exclusion zones, based on their offending behaviour and that the social element of a local connection was important to consider.

The Strategic Lead (Homelessness) confirmed that all staff within the Homelessness Service were required to undertake trauma-informed training.

With regards to how the Council engaged with prison leavers, members were advised that the Council had commissioned On the Out, which was a voluntary sector organisation that included prison leavers with lived experiences of the process who engaged with ex-offenders. It was stated that a range of engagement methods were used by the Council and the Probation Service to encourage prison leavers to live independently. The Homelessness Prevention Lead, GM Probation Service stated that The Wellbeing Service (GMIRS) was also commissioned to work with those in prison to understand the value of engaging with the homelessness assessment process and that licence conditions were also used to encourage this.

The Strategic Lead (Homelessness) endeavoured to liaise with Childrens' Services on work to support young offenders leaving custody.

In response to queries from the Chair, the Homelessness Prevention Lead, GM Probation Service explained that CAS-3 was an 84-night transitional accommodation and that prison leavers did not need to have stayed in CAS-3 accommodation to be placed in AfEO accommodation. It was also stated that there was a rent deposit scheme which allowed prison leavers to obtain a short-hold private rented tenancy. The committee was informed that DLUHC held the Council in high regard for how it had progressed the AfEO funding.

The Homelessness Prevention Lead, GM Probation Service endeavoured to provide data on the number of care leavers who had been placed in CAS-3 accommodation

but stated that these people tended to be awarded a priority need and, as such, would not necessarily require CAS-3 accommodation. The Strategic Lead (Homelessness) agreed to liaise with Childrens' Services on this.

In closing the item, the Chair thanked officers for their report and attendance.

Decision:

That the committee

1. notes the report;
2. requests further information on the policies and risk and qualitative assessments undertaken at transitional accommodation;
3. requests further information on the structures, governance arrangements and response criteria for CAS-3 accommodation;
4. requests further information on the work undertaken with young offenders to provide support upon release from custody;
5. requests further information on the number of care leavers placed in CAS-3 accommodation; and
6. requests further information on the number of CAS-3 and AfEO accommodation units within each ward in Manchester.

CESC/24/25 Update on recommendations made by the Crime and Antisocial Behaviour Task and Finish Group

The committee considered a report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) which provided an update on progress made with the recommendations of the Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Task and Finish Group on the approach to antisocial Behaviour in Manchester.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background to the Task and Finish Group, which met 3 times between September and December 2023;
- The Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee endorsed the final recommendations of the Task and Finish Group at its meeting on 5 December 2023;
- Updates on each of the 11 recommendations made by the Task and Finish Group; and
- The recommendations of the Task and Finish Group would continue to be driven by the Community Safety Partnership.

Some of the key points and queries that arose from the committee's discussion included:

- Welcoming the implementation of some of the recommendations made by the Task and Finish Group;

- Encouraging Housing Providers to develop and adopt a standardised Antisocial Behaviour policy;
- Noting the benefits of Out-of-Hours staff wearing body cameras to record footage for evidence-gathering purposes, particularly with regards to noise complaints;
- How many Out-of-Hours officers attended in response to reports of antisocial behaviour and whether they were accompanied by Greater Manchester Police; and
- Antisocial behaviour through traffic and vehicle nuisance.

The Strategic Lead (Community Safety) introduced the report and explained that it provided a response to each recommendation made by the Crime and Antisocial Behaviour Task and Finish Group, which met 3 times between September and November 2023. She highlighted that some recommendations had been implemented and completed and that some remained in progress. Members were informed that there was ongoing consultation to help develop communications and the content of this had been shared with the committee for feedback. The Strategic Lead (Community Safety) stated that the recommendations made by the Task and Finish Group would continue to be driven through the Community Safety Partnership and the Community Safety workstream of the Manchester Housing Provider Partnership.

In response to queries, the Strategic Lead (Community Safety) concurred that the need for a standard antisocial behaviour policy amongst housing providers was a strong theme that arose from the Task and Finish Group's discussions. She stated that initial conversations had been held to develop this, with work in the early stages and information being collated. It was stated that this could take up to 6 months to be finalised and that the next meeting of the Manchester Housing Provider Partnership would analyse the information collated so far.

It was stated that officers had sought and considered legal advice regarding the use of bodycam devices by Out-of-Hours staff, which was recommended by the Task and Finish Group. The Strategic Lead (Community Safety) explained that an officer's evidence was deemed sufficient enough for the Council to use its tools and powers in tackling antisocial behaviour. With specific regard to noise complaints and issues, the Antisocial Behaviour Lead explained that officers made a professional judgement when assessing noise as a statutory nuisance and witness statements were often used when assessing which tools and powers to utilise to address any issues.

The committee expressed concern that this recommendation had not been implemented and sought advice from the City Solicitor. In response, the City Solicitor explained that legal advice had already been provided and that the use of body cameras could raise issues, particularly regarding lack of context and gaining consent to record individuals. She suggested that a further update could be provided within the next couple of months to detail the use of body cameras and the rationale behind the decision not to implement the Task and Finish Group's recommendation on this.

In response to a question from the Chair, it was explained that Out-of-Hours staff worked in pairs when responding to noise complaints and that the risk assessment would be reviewed to identify if support from Greater Manchester Police (GMP) was required.

In response to a query regarding antisocial behaviour through traffic and vehicle nuisance, members were advised that a GM-wide Safe4Summer campaign was due to start, which would address safety when using off-road bikes.

In closing the item, the Chair placed on record her thanks to those members, officers and partners involved in the work of the Task and Finish Group.

Decision:

That

1. the report be noted, and
2. the committee requests a further update on the use of body cameras for Out-of-Hours staff, including rationale as to why this recommendation of the Task and Finish Group was not accepted, within the next 2 months.

CESC/24/26 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 and responses to previous recommendations. Members noted that a private work programming session would take place following the conclusion of the meeting.

Decision:

That the report be noted.