

Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 8 November 2022

Present:

Councillor Hitchen - In the Chair

Councillors Azra Ali, Benham, Chambers, Connolly, M Dar, Evans, Iqbal, Johnson, H Priest, Ogunbambo, Rawson, Sheikh, Whiston, Wills and Wilson

Also present:

Councillor Midgley, Deputy Leader

Councillor Rahman, Statutory Deputy Leader

Councillor Akbar, Executive Member for Finance and Resources

Councillor Hacking, Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure

Councillor Igbon, Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods

Councillor Simcock, Chair of the Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Karney, Lead Member for the City Centre

Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester

Baroness Bev Hughes, Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester

Chief Superintendent Richard Timson, Greater Manchester Police (GMP)

Apologies:

Councillor Hilal

CESC/22/42 Minutes

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 11 October 2022 as a correct record.

CESC/22/43 Crime and Policing

The Committee considered the report of the Police, Crime and Fire team, Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) which was a highlight report of crime and policing issues for discussion with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Lifting GMP out of special measures;
- Resources;
- Progress with IT systems;
- Reducing crime and anti-social behaviour in neighbourhoods;
- Operation Vulcan in Cheetham Hill and Strangeways;
- Roads policing and safe travel;
- Violence reduction and county lines; and
- Equality and diversity.

Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, outlined the journey of change that GMP had been through, leading to His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary (HMIC) taking GMP out of special measures recently, and the speed with which this improvement had been achieved. He highlighted the progress made across a range of areas including handling of calls from the public, time taken to respond to incidents, the quality of the response and an increase in prosecutions. He also highlighted that there had been an increased use of stop and search powers while also having a reduction in the number of complaints. He reported that a significant amount of the frontline officer posts that had been lost due to austerity had been restored and highlighted further funding from the Home Office for police officer recruitment, advising that increasingly people wanted to join GMP. He emphasised the importance of making roads policing a priority. He highlighted Operation Vulcan, which had been launched the previous week, and Operation Avro, which he advised was visible, positive policing which made an impact in communities and increased their confidence in GMP; however, he recognised that still much more needed to be done and also that, while it was not the subject of today's meeting, there were major learnings to be taken from the Manchester Arena Inquiry report.

Baroness Bev Hughes, Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester outlined how GMP had been able to make the progress it had made so far and how it would continue to do so. She informed Members that those involved in the recruitment of the new Chief Constable had been very clear about the criteria they were looking for, including a genuine commitment to a public service ethos, the ability to build leadership capability in GMP and transparency and willingness to work in partnership and she outlined how Chief Constable Stephen Watson met those requirements.

The Committee also received a presentation from Chief Superintendent Richard Timson of GMP. The key points and themes in the presentation included:

- The journey to improvement;
- Restructures;
- The force-wide approach to reduce demand on public services;
- Police operations; and
- Public and Elected Member engagement.

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

- Work to address violence against women and girls, including the impact so far and plans to continue this work;
- The confidence of communities in reporting crimes such as speeding and anti-social behaviour, including problems getting through on the 101 non-emergency number and residents who are not able to use online chat, and concern that under-reporting of crime in some areas would affect how police resources were deployed;
- What direct engagement would GMP be doing to restore public confidence in the police and how would this tie in with the Community Safety Strategy;
- Reducing serious youth violence;
- How many officers were needed to meet GMP's aims;
- The important role of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) and whether those who left were being replaced; and

- What more was needed from the national government to provide Manchester residents with more police and emergency services support.

The Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester advised that violence against women and girls was a very important area of work. She informed Members about the campaign to tackle attitudes towards sexual harassment, which had been started with the #IsThisOkay video. She advised that this was a key campaign underlying the strategy, that it would continue, including a second video, and that they were bringing boys and men into the conversation about tackling this unacceptable behaviour when they witnessed it. She informed Members about the Safer Streets programme, work with the Council on the Women's Night-time Charter, the Good Night Out Guide and Operation Lioness and reported that there was a wide array of work taking place. She informed Members that work was also taking place on Domestic Abuse, rape and serious sexual assault and reported that GMP would be one of 14 police forces taking part in Operation Soteria Bluestone, a scheme which aimed to transform the policing response to rape and serious sexual offences.

Chief Superintendent Richard Timson informed the Committee that there was a force-wide delivery plan for addressing violence against women and girls and scrutiny of that work. He outlined some of the initiatives taking place, working with partners including the student community, including the Sexual Violence Action Network, the Ask Angela initiative and work to set up something similar to the third-party reporting centres which already existed for hate crimes, where students could report sexual violence. The Chair emphasised the importance of supporting all young people, not just students.

The Mayor of Greater Manchester acknowledged the Member's comments about public confidence in reporting crime and advised that there was still work to be done. He reported that call answering on the 999 and 101 numbers had improved dramatically, with the precept having been used to recruit more call handlers, but he recognised that sometimes it could still take too long to speak to someone on the 101 non-emergency number. He advised that live chat was a good option for those who were online and should be promoted more. He informed Members about a new community messaging system which had first been introduced in Trafford and was now being introduced in Manchester and he offered to provide the Committee with further written information on this. He advised that public confidence was based on the speed of call answering and the quality of that initial interaction and then the response that came from that. He reported that GMP was already improving on these and that these improvements would continue.

The Mayor of Greater Manchester stated that serious youth violence was a major concern. He advised that this was a societal issue, not just a policing issue, and that, through the Violence Reduction Unit, a more sophisticated response was being developed. He advised that many young people in the region were living in fear and that a lot of the young people who carried weapons did so because they were afraid, not because they were intending to commit acts of violence. He informed Members about eight community-led pilot projects taking place across Greater Manchester, to address the issues. He stated that he believed this was the right approach to addressing the problem and, with perseverance, would lead to results. Chief Superintendent Richard Timson outlined some of the root causes of youth violence

which needed to be addressed, working in partnership with local communities and organisations who worked in those communities.

The Deputy Mayor reported that there was evidence from Manchester Metropolitan University that the work in communities in relation to youth violence did lead to a sustained reduction in offences. In response to the question about community engagement activity to improve public confidence in GMP, she informed Members that GMP had undertaken a large consultation with local communities over the summer and that engagement work would continue. She stated that she could not provide a figure for what she considered the ideal number of officers; however, at the end of the national officer uplift programme, GMP would have about 8,100 officers, which was significantly higher than the 6,000 it had dropped to during the austerity measures. She highlighted that a large number of these would be recently recruited, inexperienced officers, so further work would be needed to develop their expertise. She advised that the Chief Constable was undertaking a review to ascertain the correct numbers of PCSOs and police officers in each team, although she was not aware of any current decision not to replace PCSOs who left.

The Mayor of Greater Manchester advised that public confidence would be built over time due to local beat officers working in the same neighbourhoods and developing relationships and also by providing a good quality response and the publicising of that response. He advised that Councillors had a key role to play in this. In response to the question about what was needed from the national government, he said that long-term stability in terms of investment in policing was needed, with resources commensurate with the level of threat and harm in communities. He advised that this also applied to council funding as cuts to local government also impacted on community safety. He reported that the government and all political parties in Westminster needed to understand the current situation with local services and the pressures on local people and the risk that further austerity cuts would present.

Chief Superintendent Richard Timson reported that officer capacity and capability were both important and that GMP had lost a lot of that capability during the austerity period, as experienced officers left and were not replaced, and that GMP was working to build that capacity up again. He added that there were a lot of experienced police officers due to retire in the next couple of years. He advised that the cost-of-living crisis presented another challenge as it tended to lead to an increase in vulnerability and criminality.

The Chair thanked the guests for attending the meeting and invited them to attend a future meeting. She asked Chief Superintendent Richard Timson to provide an update at a future meeting on the communications work, public confidence and how the journey to improvement was going and she thanked the guests, and everyone at GMP, for their work. The Statutory Deputy Leader welcomed the opportunity to hear from the three guests at today's meeting and the improvement journey that GMP was on.

Decisions

1. To invite the guests to attend a future Committee meeting, including asking Chief Superintendent Richard Timson to provide an update on the communications work, public confidence and how the journey to improvement is going.
2. That the Members' questions which had not been raised during the meeting, due to time constraints, will be sent to the Mayor's Office for a response.

CESC/22/44 Revenue Budget Update - Cover Report

The Committee considered the report of the Deputy Chief Executive and City Treasurer that set out the financial challenge facing the Council, the latest forecast position, and the next steps.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- The Council was forecasting an estimated budget shortfall of £44m in 2023/24, £85m in 2024/25, and £112m by 2025/26. After the use of c£16m smoothing reserves in each of the three years, this gap reduced to £28m in 2023/24, £69m in 2024/25 and £96m by 2025/26;
- Setting out the high-level position;
- Describing the officer-identified potential savings options to reduce the budget gap totalling £42.3m over three years;
- Noting that even after these proposals there remained a budget gap of £7m to close to get to a balanced budget in 2023/24 and further savings options would be developed between now and January 2023 and be reported back to scrutiny committees in February; and
- 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 agreed to the final budget proposals in February 2023.

Decision

To note the report.

CESC/22/45 Neighbourhood Directorate 2023/24 Budget

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhood Services) which was the first in the cycle for the budget programme 2023-26. It set out an overview of the services within the remit of this scrutiny committee and their key priorities. The budget growth assumptions in the Medium-Term Financial Plan were set out. The report provided a draft set of officer proposals for further savings for 2023-26, developed in the context of the financial challenge facing the Council.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Providing an overview of the service and priorities;
- A description of the service budget and the proposed changes;

- Describing the proposed savings programme;
- Workforce implications;
- Equality and anti-poverty impact; and
- Future opportunities and risk.

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

- That the Council had been put in the difficult position of having to identify cuts this year and in previous years, through no fault of its own;
- Concern about the impact of job losses in this economic climate;
- Proposals for reducing the hours that the Art Gallery was open;
- The importance of libraries, galleries and culture to the well-being of Manchester residents, in particular recognising the role that libraries played in supporting people, and the impact of the cuts that the Council was being forced to make;
- The impact on local community groups of the proposal to reduce the Neighbourhood Investment Fund (NIF) for each ward;
- Staff turnover in Community Safety and Compliance; and
- The proposed withdrawal of the Central Library digital media lounge.

The Strategic Director (Neighbourhood Services) recognised the vital role that libraries played and advised that officers had been very careful to ensure that the cuts proposed did not result in libraries closing or reducing their opening hours. In response to a Member's question, he reported that it was not envisaged that there would be a significant environmental impact of the proposed savings but that there could be a reduced capacity to increase the work to tackle climate change, for example, reducing the capacity for the NIF to support community projects could mean that some local environmental projects did not receive this funding.

In response to a question about the vacancy factor referred to in the report, the Head of Finance explained that this was a way of taking into account that not all staff would be at the top point of their salary grade, that there would be a natural turnover of staff, with posts vacant for a short period, and that not all staff would be in the pension fund, which the Council contributed to. In response to a question about inflationary pressures, he advised that the figures in table one in the cover report included elements of inflation, where they tended to be held corporately rather than under individual directorates.

The Senior Operational Lead (Galleries) reported that the savings proposal related to reducing gallery opening hours would be achieved through removing vacant posts in the visitor engagement team. She advised that her service was reviewing how to reduce the gallery opening hours, which could be through closing for an additional day or opening later in the morning.

The Head of Compliance Enforcement and Community Safety reported that there were recruitment and retention problems in the Licensing Out of Hours team due to the shift work and her service was reviewing the shift patterns. She advised that the problems with recruiting to Trading Standards posts was part of a national problem, which the Council was addressing through a "grow your own" programme.

Therefore, she advised that they were not anticipating that the underspend on staffing would be as high in future.

The Citywide Services Manager explained that the digital media lounge had been temporarily closed during the pandemic but had not re-opened and the proposal was to keep it closed. He advised that the lounge had provided access to Mac computers but that these had since been re-located into the Music Library within Central Library. He reported that the digital media lounge had also provided additional desk space, commenting that the amount of study space in the Music Library in Central Library had been slightly increased. He also informed Members about the proposed reduction in the stock team, which would be achieved by people leaving and removing vacant posts. He advised that this was linked to the reduction in the book fund and also to improved technology, which meant that less data-inputting was required when new stock was bought. In response to a question from the Chair, he acknowledged that the proposed reduction in the book fund would be a challenge but advised that officers would look at the areas of purchasing which would have less impact on residents, such as electronic information subscriptions, and stated that he was confident that it would have little impact on the purchasing of books for children.

In response to questions from a number of Members in relation to events, the Strategic Director (Neighbourhood Services) explained that officers had tried to protect funding for important community events and those that had the largest impact on the city, economically and socially, and that, following this consideration, it was proposed that funding be removed from the Christmas Lights Switch On and New Year's Eve Fireworks. He advised that these events could still take place if they were funded by a different source and that these would be savings, not money which would be reinvested elsewhere. He reported that proposals relating to Bonfire Night events were being submitted to the Environment and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee, including looking at doing alternative community events. He advised that this year, when the Council had not re-introduced its Bonfire Night events after the pandemic, was being used as a trial and that decisions would be subject to an assessment of the impact this had had on communities and neighbourhoods. The Chair advised that the Committee would be receiving a report on this at a future meeting. In response to further questions, the Strategic Director (Neighbourhood Services) advised that the Christmas Lights Switch On would not have taken place this year, regardless of the budget proposals, because Albert Square was not available; however, the proposal was to not fund this event in future years. He advised that the events which it was proposed not to fund either had less of an impact or could potentially be funded from other sources. He advised that the costs of Bonfire events had been increasing and the intention was that the Council would fund other events in the autumn but not bonfires and fireworks, subject to the assessment of what had happened this year. He clarified that the proposals for Bonfire Night would involve making savings of £40,000 but using the rest of the money to fund alternative events.

The Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure stated that no one wanted to be making these decisions but the proposals were being put forward as the ones which would have as limited an impact on the economy of the city and on residents' well-being as possible.

The Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods thanked officers for their hard work in developing these proposals and advised that Members' feedback would be taken on board.

The Statutory Deputy Leader expressed concern about the wider impact of the cuts that the Council was being forced to consider.

Decision

To note the report, subject to Members' comments.

CESC/22/46 Homelessness Directorate 2023/24 Budget

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhood Services) which set out the priorities for the services in the remit of this Committee and detailed the initial revenue budget changes proposed by officers.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Service overview and priorities;
- Service budget and proposed changes;
- Workforce; and
- Future opportunities and risks.

The Deputy Leader expressed concern at the cuts that the Council had been faced with over 12 years and the cumulative effect of this, and the factors which were contributing towards people becoming homeless. She highlighted that it was not proposed to reduce the gross homelessness budget as this was an important area; however, it was proposed that, by investing in work to prevent homelessness, savings could be made over the next few years on the amount of money spent on housing people in bed-and-breakfast accommodation and other temporary accommodation.

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

- To support investment in work to prevent homelessness;
- How much certainty there was about the potential saving from a change in the Allocations Procedure to allow people to be classified as Homeless at Home at the Prevention stage, as referred to in Appendix 1;
- How much certainty there was that savings to bed-and-breakfast costs could be made through investing in prevention, given the complexity of the issues relating to homelessness and the cost-of-living crisis; and
- To request that the report on Homelessness which was scheduled for the Committee's January 2023 meeting include information about the work being done to factor in the additional challenges associated with the cost-of-living crisis.

The Chair recognised the hard work of those working in the Homelessness Service and asked that the Committee's thanks be passed on to the frontline staff.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources stated that the reports presented were currently officer proposals only. He stated that the Government's Autumn Statement and final financial settlement were still to be announced. He stated that the public consultation on the Council's Budget had commenced and would run until 7 January 2023, adding that difficult decisions would need to be taken and it was important to hear the views of Manchester residents. He commented that the financial situation the Council found itself in was not the fault of the Council, adding that the Council was a well-managed and financially responsible organisation and this could be evidenced. He stated that the fault was the direct result of ideological decisions taken by the government over the previous decade. He stated that the budget cuts imposed on Manchester had been unfair. He stated that, if Manchester had received the average cuts to funding, the Council budget would be £77m per year better off. He stated that it was calculated that the gap in Local Authority funding nationally was in excess of £3bn, adding that it was estimated that one in six councils could run out of money next year. He called upon the government to protect councils as these provided essential services for some of the most vulnerable in society, especially in the context of the cost-of-living crisis. The Chair supported these comments.

Decision

To note the report, subject to the above comments, and to note that the Committee will be receiving a further report on homelessness at its January meeting.

CESC/22/47 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.

Decision

To note the report and agree the work programme.