

Environment, Climate Change and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2024

Present:

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

Apologies: Councillor Collins and Holt

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 Ahmed Ali, Deputy Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods
Councillor White, Executive Member for Housing and Development
Councillor Hacking, Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure
Councillor Johns, Chair of the Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee

ECCNSC/24/13 Minutes

Decision

To approve the minutes of the Environment and Climate Change Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 8 February 2024 as a correct record.

ECCNSC/24/14 Housing Retrofit

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director, Growth and Development that provided an update on the Council's proposals to decarbonise the city's housing.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background;
- An update on Social Housing, including Council owned properties;
- Describing the programmes targeted at private homeowners and the private rented sector;
- Cross tenure approaches and area-based schemes;
- Information on research projects;
- Resident engagement;
- Discussion of work and skills, incorporating an update on Green Skills;
- Funding arrangements;
- Internal staffing resources;
- An update on the approach to developing a Retrofit Plan; and
- Conclusions.

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

- That future update reports should include a visual representation that describes delivery of retrofitting by different tenures, this could be a graph or similar chart so as to understand progress against the stated ambition to retrofit 84,000 homes in the city by the end of 2025;
- Recognising the complexity of this issue and the limitations presented as a result of the short-term funding pots of money that were available to the city;
- The need for continual lobbying of the government for adequate, long-term funding to deliver the ambitions described;
- Recognising the importance of delivering housing retrofit at scale as an important contributor to delivering the carbon reduction target for the city;
- Noting that retrofitting was also a social justice issue, particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis;
- Social Housing Providers should collaborate to deliver housing retrofit programmes and use their collective powers to achieve economies of scale when commissioning works;
- Were loans available, rather than grants for residents wishing to undertake retrofit work on their properties; and
- The position on new builds and the installation of gas boilers.

The Executive Member for Housing and Development acknowledged the ask from the Committee regarding a dashboard to report progress against the 2025 target and stated that consideration would be given to how best to provide this in future update reports. He commented that retrofitting work was part of the wider Housing Strategy for the city, adding that initially the work had been targeted at social housing using the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund. He added that local Housing Providers had applied for and been awarded funding through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund also, however he highlighted the issues and challenges surrounding green skills to deliver the work at the scale and pace required. He commented that the projects that had been delivered, including the pilot zero carbon retrofitting in North Manchester had demonstrated proof of concept to drive this programme of work. He described the current challenges to delivery, namely inadequate and short-term funding arrangements, inflationary pressures and the need to improve tenant engagement on this important subject area. He said that delivery of retrofitting needed to be considered in terms of both addressing the climate crisis and the many benefits to residents, both in terms of living in more comfortable and cost-effective homes. In response to residents who were willing to pay and the different options available, he commented that the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) Portal would direct people to the different schemes available, adding that the 'Feel the Benefit' campaign to help Greater Manchester residents access home energy savings support was due to be launched. This campaign would see GMCA and its partners coming together to make energy saving advice clearer and easier to access. He said that until gas boilers were banned there were currently no enforcement options available however officers would continue to engage with developers on this issue, adding that the Local Plan would strengthen this position and new social housing buildings included alternatives to traditional gas boilers.

The Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure discussed the challenges that existed in terms of the work and skills market to deliver the scale of retrofitting

required. He described the work of the Work and Skills Team who had embedded within the Liveable and Zero Carbon priorities into the refreshed Work and Skills Strategy. He commented that this refreshed Work and Skills Strategy would be reported to the Executive and appropriate Scrutiny Committee. He further advised that the Work and Skills Team were also working closely with GMCA providing support and promotion of commissioned activities to improve the provision of retrofit skills in Greater Manchester. He referred to the Green Skills Academy as an important development for the city and wider city region, adding that this provided an opportunity and platform to engage and work with employers to offer trainee and apprenticeship roles. He further discussed the current challenge that existed in regard to qualification recognition and the qualification structure, adding that discussions were ongoing with providers to address these issues. He also discussed the challenge regarding current government funding arrangements, particularly for Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) adding that the current model did not work for this sector and lobbying of government continued on this issue. He further referred to huge pipeline of construction contracts that existed, with construction companies being very busy and noting that this presented a challenge to them releasing existing staff to retrain and learn new green skills. He concluded by stating that both government and industry were yet to understand the scale and pace required to deliver the works required.

The Committee welcomed Councillor Johns, Chair of the Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee. He stated that he welcomed the progress reported since this had last been last considered by the Economy and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee. He said that he recognised the constraints placed on the city's ambitions due to the inadequate and short-term funding arrangements provided by the government. He also acknowledged the challenges described regarding green skills as previously articulated by the Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure. He commented that challenges also existed in relation to the funding of post 16-year-old education and vocational skills, including the number of teachers to teach construction skills. He added that consideration needed to be given to how to include figures in future reports to demonstrate the gaps in the labour supply and narrative on what was being done to address this.

The Assistant Director of Strategic Housing stated that the funding made available to deliver housing retrofit works was to raise properties to a minimum of an energy performance certificate (EPC) rating of C, however the ambition in Manchester was to raise this to B.

The Strategic Director, Growth & Development said that different Social Housing Providers worked collaboratively to deliver retrofitting works, however they also were reliant on grant funding, adding that discussions were ongoing with the GMCA to understand the opportunities via the trailblazer devolution arrangements to support this activity. The Executive Member for Housing and Development added that he would discuss the issue raised with the Manchester Housing Providers Partnership. The Zero Carbon Programme Manager commented that there was an established history of collaborative working across the different Social Housing Providers in the city, adding that strategic consideration was given to the issue of retrofitting as part of their wider asset management strategy.

The Zero Carbon Programme Manager discussed the issue of tracking progress of housing retrofit delivery and how this could be tracked and reported against the established science-based carbon reduction target for the city and consideration would be given to this, noting the capacity issues within the team. She stated that the Council's Climate Change Action Plan would be refreshed in 2025 and they would be involved in those discussions as that work was progressed. She commented that the term retrofit meant different things and there was no standardised definition due to the complexity of this issue as the report articulated.

Decision

To note the report and recommend that future update reports include a visual representation that describes delivery of retrofitting by different tenure so as to understand progress against the stated ambition to retrofit 84,000 homes in the city by the end of 2025.

[Councillor Shilton Godwin declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest in this item as she would be engaging the services of the Your Home Better scheme.]

ECCNSC/24/15 Manchester Green and Blue Strategy and Implementation Plan, including annual update and a report on the Tree and Woodland Action Plan

The Committee considered the report of the Director of Planning, Building Control and Licensing that provided the annual update on the delivery of the Green and Blue (G&BI) Implementation Plan together with information on the Biodiversity Action plan and new draft Tree and Woodland Action Plan.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background;
- Describing the governance arrangements and the role of the G&BI Board;
- Places for Everyone, noting that this had been recommended for adoption and would be going to Executive on the 15 March and Council on the 20 March for adoption by Council;
- Local Plan, noting that the preparation of a draft Local Plan would include strong environmental policies around green and blue infrastructure, biodiversity and open space making full use of the up-to-date evidence produced through the G&BI Strategy;
- Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and Urban Green Factor, noting that a Manchester Urban Green Factor approach was being considered for inclusion within the Local Plan to ensure developers were delivering more green infrastructure;
- An update on the G&BI Implementation Plan;
- Information of the Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) design guide;
- Awards and recognition;
- An update on the Tree Action Plan, including findings from the public consultation;
- Providing an update on the delivery of the Manchester Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan; and
- Key priorities for 2024/25.

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

- Highways works and the planting of trees;
- The need to increase leaf cover in the city centre to counter the heat island effect and increase carbon capture;
- Trees on Council owned land and what protections were in place to protect these in the event that the land was sold;
- The need to ensure that urban waterways were free of rubbish and pollution to promote biodiversity, noting the complexity of this due to the different owners;
- The approach to weirs;
- How was the 10% uplift in biodiversity provision that all developments would be expected to provide calculated and how would this be enforced;
- The learning from the delivery of the West Gorton Community 'Sponge' Park should be used in all new developments;
- Water recycling and the use of grey water should be incorporated into all new developments;
- The need to ensure BNG was delivered on site when developments were delivered;
- Noting the importance of planting the correct species of trees;
- Noting the responses from the public consultation, adding that consideration needed to be given to increasing the response rate from different demographic groups; and
- Paying tribute to the Arbor team for their continued advice and support to local Members.

The Director of Planning, Building Control and Licensing stated that the team worked closely with the Highways Department to deliver appropriate tree planting when schemes were delivered. She commented that the importance of tree planting to provide canopy cover and counter the heat island effect, especially in the city centre, was understood. She commented that this was considered as part of the wider sustainable growth agenda to be included in the Local Plan.

The Director of Planning, Building Control and Licensing stated that the Council were the custodians of any high value trees on land that the Council owned, and the importance of trees were recognised in the principles of development. In regard to 'on site' BNG as opposed to 'off site' she said that currently they could not legislate against delivery of BNG 'off site', however the Local Plan would establish a hierarchy of preference.

The Director of Planning, Building Control and Licensing stated that all developers were required to submit a detailed Environmental Standard Statement that provided information on a range of environmental conditions and helped to show how a proposed development would affect the environment. This provided an opportunity to engage with developers on this topic.

The Senior Policy Officer referred to the Our Rivers Our City that was delivered in partnership with the Environment Agency, Natural England and United Utilities. He said that the interconnectivity of the water network was recognised with dialogue with different authorities had been initiated. He further advised that weirs were a barrier to biodiversity and the removal of these promoted connectivity between different

waterways and subsequently supported the local ecology. He further commented that the removal of these also contributed to flood resilience work. He advised that a bid had been submitted for the Medlock Project to improve connectivity and an update on this would be provided to the Committee at the appropriate time. He commented that if Members were interested, he would facilitate a walk along the Medlock to describe the ambitions.

The Planning and Infrastructure Manager commented that the Environment Agency were the principal responsible body to deal with issues of pollution in waterways, adding that Our Rivers Our City included consideration of pollution.

The Senior Policy Officer described that discussions were also ongoing across boundaries regarding tree planting and made reference to the work with Salford to identify cross boundary locations that would be suitable for tree planting. He stated that a long-term approach was being taken to the location of tree planting to increase canopy cover with a refreshed methodology to undertake a tree audit and report the increase in canopy cover.

The Neighbourhoods Team Lead, Grounds Maintenance commented that the importance of native trees was understood however consideration was given to climate resilience when selecting tree species. He added that this approach was undertaken in consultation with national experts.

The Principal Policy Officer provided a detailed response that described how the 10% uplift in biodiversity would be calculated based on the metrics prescribed in the national guidance. She commented that these would be included in any subsequent planning conditions or Section 106 agreements with developers. She said that the monitoring of these sites, including off site locations that would be required to be registered, will be monitored for the subsequent thirty years, noting that the Ecology Unit would be upscaled to support this activity.

Decision

To note the report.

ECCNSC/24/16 Update on The Management And Provision Of Allotments

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) that provided an overview of the provision and management of allotments in Manchester.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Discussion of the current position and progress against Allotments Objectives;
- The approach to increasing access to the use of allotments and food growing spaces;
- Improvement to the quality of provision to ensure allotment sites were welcoming and accessible to all;
- The approach to ensuring sustainable practice; and
- Next steps.

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

- Welcoming the work described and acknowledging the work undertaken by all officers involved in the work described;
- Welcoming the decision to reduce plot sizes to increase uptake;
- Welcoming the work to return to use derelict plots;
- Had there been any analysis of the cost-of-living crisis and the use of allotments by residents to grow their own food;
- Was consideration given to increasing the number of allotments and using other available green space for food growing opportunities;
- Noting the current waiting lists and the level of unmet need; and
- The use of pesticides, and had consideration been given to introducing an organic only policy across the city.

The Deputy Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods spoke of the many benefits offered by allotments. These included health and wellbeing, developing and strengthening community groups, supporting biodiversity and contributing the actions to address climate change.

The Parks Lead address the Committee by paying tribute to her colleague Sam Simpson who had been involved in the work described and who had sadly passed away last May. She wished to place on public record her recognition and appreciation of this work and the important contribution Sam made to the team.

The Parks Lead stated that the report described the positive progress that had been achieved to date to understand the use of allotments, including the donation of excess produce to local food banks. She said that all opportunities for increasing provision were considered, noting the correct use and balance of green space needed to be achieved. She said that these opportunities would be explored through the local Neighbourhood Teams in close consultation with the local community.

The Strategy Manager, Parks commented that demand for allotments had increased, hence the work to maximise plot space on those existing allotment sites. He stated that this increase in demand was as a result of a number of factors, including an increase in population and the cost-of-living crisis. He commented that the introduction of the improved data management system would help improve turnover rates and help address issues when plots were left uncultivated. He further noted the comment from a Member and stated that any local issues could be picked up following the meeting.

The Parks Lead stated that local volunteer societies were important in the promotion of best practice on allotment sites, recognising that a lot of good work was already done in relation to the use of pesticides. She said that the ambition was to scale up this work and develop and set of principles for all sites that included actions to increase and support biodiversity.

The Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods commented that the work described needed to be considered in the wider context of the Manchester Green and Blue Strategy that had previously been discussed earlier on the agenda. She commented that appropriate consideration needed to be given to expanding

allotment provision across the city when considering wider developments and the use of associated green space.

The Deputy Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods commented that due consideration to land ownership had to be given when considering alternative sites. The Director of Neighbourhood Delivery added that issues of land contamination also needed to be taken into account when identifying potential alternative sites for food growing opportunities.

The Deputy Executive Member for Vibrant Neighbourhoods concluded by informing the Committee that Manchester Metropolitan University were undertaking a research study in Rusholme into the use of green space and he would circulate information on this work to the Committee for information.

Decision

To note the report.

[Councillor Shilton Godwin declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest in this item as she is a plot holder at the Cleveleys Avenue site.]

ECCNSC/24/17 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 commented that she would be speaking with relevant Executive Members and Officers to scope the Work Programme for the new municipal year.

Decision

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