

Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 5 March 2024

Present:

Councillor – in the Chair

Councillors Appleby, Good, Ogunbambo, Rawson, Sheikh, Whiston and Wills

Also present:

Councillor Hacking, Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure

Councillor Douglas, Deputy Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure

Eamonn O'Rourke, Interim Chief Executive Officer, Manchester Active

Louise Harding, Facility Strategy and Capital Project Lead, Manchester Active

Apologies: Councillors Hitchen and Azra Ali

CESC/24/16 Appointment of Chair for the Meeting

In opening the meeting, the Governance and Scrutiny Team Leader informed the committee that the Chair had submitted her apologies for the meeting.

Decision:

That Councillor Appleby be appointed as Chair for the meeting.

CESC/24/17 Minutes

Decision:

That the minutes of the previous meeting, held on 6 February 2024, be approved as a correct record.

CESC/24/18 Manchester Indoor Sport Built Facilities Strategy Update

The Committee considered a report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) which provided an update on the key findings identified in the Manchester Indoor and Sport Built Facilities Strategy (2023-2031) and short-term action plan, to be taken forward with partners over the next 18-month period.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background to the Strategy;
- Manchester had a strong network of indoor sport and leisure facilities and a sufficient supply to meet demand;
- The governance of the Strategy, including the work of the project steering group;
- Findings of a needs assessment study for sports halls, swimming pools, health and fitness and other facilities; and

- The strategic objectives and action plans developed from analysis and assessments.

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

- Commending the work of Manchester Active;
- Whether driving distance was an accurate method of measuring accessibility of indoor sports facilities;
- A need to develop sites with strong transport networks;
- Capacity at swimming pools, particularly for children and young people;
- Facilities for disabled service users;
- Noting the point that the majority of Manchester's population had access to a facility within a ten-minute walk, and querying what this majority was;
- Current and future capacity of sports halls;
- How the need to prioritise demand for swimming facilities in the city centre was balanced with capacity in areas such as central Manchester; and
- Whether section 106 money received through new developments could be used to fund new indoor sports facilities.

The committee were presented with a short video to introduce the item.

In response to members' queries, the Interim Chief Executive Officer, Manchester Active explained that Sport England recognised a 30-minute drive as the measure of accessibility to leisure facilities and Manchester Active used this measure to ensure that it followed national standards. He stated that Manchester Active focused on local active travel to ensure that each facility could be easily accessed. He highlighted that Manchester had been named the European Capital of Cycling for 2024, which would help to publicise the ability for residents to cycle to sports facilities.

The Facility Strategy and Capital Project Lead, Manchester Active explained that there was a strong network of sports hall facilities in the city and most residents lived within a 10-minute walk of a sports hall and within 20 minutes of active travel to a swimming pool.

The Interim Chief Executive Officer, Manchester Active stated that recently built schools and those that Manchester Active were currently working with had to adhere to Community Use Agreements. He explained that agreements with Academies were not as definitive and that use of these facilities relied on working with the schools, many of which were receptive to the opportunity. The Facility Strategy and Capital Project Lead, Manchester Active explained that a planning condition regarding use of sports facilities was enforced on any new school development and Manchester Active was involved in site management arrangements to ensure that a local sports development plan could be implemented in the construction of a new school. She also stated that funding of over £200k had been allocated by Sport England over two years to 12 primary and secondary schools to widen access to sports provisions.

With regards to disabled-accessible facilities, the committee was informed that Manchester designed and supported facilities for all and he endeavoured to contact the Member following the meeting to discuss and understand his specific experience.

In response to a query regarding swimming capacity, the committee was advised that Manchester led the way in this area, but it was acknowledged that there was always more to be done. The Interim Chief Executive Officer, Manchester Active stated that no other local authority had invested as many resources into new swimming pools as Manchester. He recognised capacity issues in some swimming facilities and explained that work was needed to encourage residents to use swimming facilities in areas of the city where there was greater capacity, such as Manchester Aquatic Centre, to maximise capital investment. The Facility Strategy and Capital Project Lead, Manchester Active commented that a marketing strategy was needed with the leisure operator to encourage usage of under-utilised swimming facilities. The committee was also advised that Manchester had one of the largest swimming education programmes in the country, which taught essential skills and provided children with the confidence to continue to use swimming facilities as they got older.

The Facility Strategy and Capital Project Lead, Manchester Active clarified that references in the report to a “majority of residents” related to more than 75% of the population.

The Interim Chief Executive Officer, Manchester Active advised members that the need for sports hall and swimming pool provisions was currently being met but future need was dependent on population growth. He stated that sports halls were easier to identify and provide than swimming pools as they were cheaper to run, required less land and there were greater opportunities for collaboration with partners.

In response to a query regarding the use of Section 106 money, the Facility Strategy and Capital Project Lead, Manchester Active explained that this was received where a development was brought forward on land designated for leisure use and a mitigation strategy would be devised for the replacement of any leisure provision on the site. She stated that Manchester Active was involved in the Council’s Local Plan Review Steering Group which helped to identify future need for outdoor and indoor sport and informed the prioritisation of future Section 106 money devolved from planned development.

In summarising, the Chair thanked the Executive Member and officers for their report and acknowledged the funding challenges facing Manchester. She highlighted how Manchester was leading the way with regards to indoor sports provisions and welcomed the year-round swimming offer for children.

Decision:

That the report be noted.

CESC/24/19 Manchester Libraries Update

The Committee considered a report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) which provided an update on the Library Strategy and presented future plans.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background;
- How the Library Strategy was delivered in 2023 and how it would be delivered in future;
- How the library service contributed to the Council's priorities;
- How the libraries performed in 2023;
- The range of services provided across the city;
- Engagement with children, young people and businesses;
- How libraries supported health and wellbeing; and
- A response to the Sanderson Review of Public Libraries.

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

- Recognising the important contributions of library volunteers;
- Requesting that the Avenue Library and Learning Centre in Blackley open for longer;
- Acknowledging that many libraries were fulfilling those functions of the state that the government had failed to do since 2010;
- What challenges could face the library sector if the Conservative Party won the next General Election;
- How the introduction of new Open Plus technology increased opening hours; and
- How cybersecurity was addressed, particularly given the breach at the British Library in 2023.

In introducing the item, the Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure took the opportunity to thank the Council's officers and partners for their work, particularly in the context of 14 years of government austerity, and he encouraged members and residents to recognise the Council's achievements.

The Deputy Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure also expressed thanks to library staff and stated that libraries were the heart of Manchester's communities and helped to improve the lives of residents. She highlighted the different services which Manchester's libraries offered, such as addressing period poverty through the Package for Val scheme, which she stated demonstrated how libraries positively impacted the lives of residents. She also highlighted the Council's continued investment, such as the opening of three new libraries in Gorton, Abraham Moss and Northenden.

The Head of Libraries, Galleries, Culture and Youth, Play and Participation Services explained that 2024 was a special year for Manchester's libraries as it marked the 90-year anniversary of Central Library's original opening in 1934 and the 10-year anniversary of it reopening.

Videos about Central Library and Newton Heath Library were also played to the committee.

In response to a query regarding the potential challenges facing the library sector in the future, the Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure stated that there would be a significant funding challenge across local government which libraries would not be immune to. He stated that there was a possibility in changes in technology and library usage but explained that the Libraries Strategy addressed these issues. The Head of Libraries, Galleries, Culture and Youth, Play and Participation Services stated that usage of libraries was close to pre-pandemic levels and that officers continued to make libraries welcoming and accessible through extended opening hours and the use of Open Plus technology.

The committee was informed that many libraries had certain days where they did not open due to funding constraints and Open Plus technology allowed for people over the age of 16 to use facilities when a member of staff was not present. It was explained that this technology was currently in place in 5 libraries, including the Avenue Library and Learning Centre in Blackley.

The Libraries and Archives Lead advised the committee that some figures relating to internet usage in appendix 1 were incorrect. He clarified that this should read 301,000 hours of free internet used in libraries and 970,000 Wi-Fi sessions.

In response to a query regarding cybersecurity, the Libraries and Archives Lead acknowledged the importance of this and stated that the Council's ICT service provided a great support to libraries. The Head of Libraries, Galleries, Culture and Youth, Play and Participation Services commented that a 'lessons learned' exercise was being undertaken by the libraries sector as a whole following the incident at the British Library.

The Head of Libraries, Galleries, Culture and Youth, Play and Participation Services also informed the committee that a survey was undertaken every 3 years with library users. He explained that the results on satisfaction in the last survey were the highest ever received and there was a clear indication of how libraries positively contributed to residents' health and wellbeing, which he welcomed.

In summarising, the Chair welcomed the 10-year anniversary of the reopening of Central Library and reiterated that it was the most visited library in the country, which she stated Manchester should be proud of. She commented that the service provided by libraries was remarkable under the challenging financial circumstances of 14 years of austerity and she welcomed the case studies included in the videos and that usage was returning to pre-pandemic levels.

Decision:

That the report be noted.

CESC/24/20 Digital Inclusion Update - Bridging The Digital Divide In Manchester

The committee considered a report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) which provided an update on the Council's digital inclusion work, since the last report to the committee in March 2023.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- Providing an introduction to the Manchester Digital Strategy 2021-2026: Doing Digital Together;
- Digital inclusion work aligns with the priorities of the region, the city, and the Council;
- How digital inclusion work contributed to the Council's strategies;
- The development and implementation of the Digital Inclusion Action Plan;
- How the digital inclusion programme was funded;
- Future priorities and projects; and
- Breakdowns of areas in the city where digital exclusion was highest.

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

- Querying if the Council's Digital Inclusion team was working with any other LGBT+ community organisations in addition to George House Trust to help them improve their digital offer to service users;
- Whether any consideration had been given to co-designing the Council's online systems with users;
- Whether there was any scope to work with internet service providers on the rollout of Gigabit capable broadband;
- What other markers were used to identify hotspot areas of digital exclusion;
- The importance mesh networks which would provide free internet to communities, and the need to pilot these in Manchester;
- Poor internet connectivity in Manchester's libraries;
- Suggesting that the Council donates free dongles to residents rather than SIM cards; and
- Issues with accessing healthcare and GP appointments in an increasingly digital world.

The Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure informed the committee that since the last Digital Inclusion Update, he had given evidence to a House of Lords Select Committee on digital inclusion and that this committee had been impressed by Manchester's work in tackling this issue. He also informed the committee that the Council had developed a Digital Exclusion Index with data from several sources to understand the level of digital skills in the city. He stated that there were currently around 12 hotspot areas where support was focused.

The Deputy Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure explained that focus was placed on inclusion with digital channels as a vehicle for this. She

commented that those digitally excluded often faced other kinds of exclusion and disadvantage and were disproportionately affected. She stated that a USwitch report in July 2023 found that Manchester was the most digitally inclusive city in the UK, which meant that there were more organisations and community groups offering digital skills support per capita than anywhere else in the country. It was stated that the Digital Inclusion Steering Group influenced the work undertaken with partners, such as third-sector organisations; the NHS; education; social media and public affairs companies; Microsoft; and local technology start-ups.

The Libraries and Archives Lead stated that libraries played a key role in providing internet access and support to residents and that there had been a focus over the previous 12 months on supporting VCSE organisations to embed digital inclusion support, which would continue.

In response to a member's query regarding what other LGBT+ organisations were being worked with, the Libraries and Archives Lead agreed to share a full list of organisations with members following the meeting.

The Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure stated that it was inevitable that many systems would be online in future, and he endeavoured to raise the possibility of co-designing systems with users with his fellow Executive Members.

The Head of Libraries, Galleries, Culture and Youth, Play and Participation Services explained that there had been a focus on targeted support in libraries for residents using the Council's website to apply for parking permits or voter ID, for example. He acknowledged the opportunity to work with the wider Council to identify any changes to the Council website which libraries staff could provide support to service users on.

With regards to work with internet service providers, the Deputy Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure advised that the Digital Inclusion Steering Group had discussed this, and conversations had taken place with Virgin Media, particularly regarding the possibility of mesh pilots across deprived areas. She stated that there was an appetite for co-working, particularly between housing providers and internet service providers and the Steering Group would continue to look into this.

The Senior Digital Strategy Officer informed members of an ongoing project with Telcom providers to map connectivity and ensure equity of access and speed across the city. He also stated that the Digital Strategy team had fed into the design of the new CRM system to ensure inclusivity and ongoing feedback was received from the Manchester Deaf Centre, which the Digital Strategy team worked closely with.

In response to a query regarding the indicators of hotspots of digital inclusion, the Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure stated that there were approximately 10 markers which could be circulated following the meeting. The Libraries and Archives Lead explained that much of this was tied into deprivation indices.

The Deputy Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure explained that the Digital Inclusion Steering Group had received examples of areas where mesh networks had been successfully rolled out in Greater Manchester. This was something that the Council hoped to implement, and early negotiations were underway. The Senior Digital Strategy Officer confirmed that conversations were ongoing with Wythenshawe Community Housing Group and the Council's Housing Services with buy-in from both leadership teams to progress the pilot and learning had been taken from Rochdale Council, who successfully implemented a low-cost, high-impact mesh network. He stated that the project was still in the discovery phase but emphasised that there was a strong appetite to progress.

The Executive Member for Skills, Employment and Leisure informed the committee that the Digital Inclusion Steering Group had discussed the cost-of-living crisis and the possibility of social tariffs with internet service providers, which could provide low-cost internet for basic use, and this had been piloted in Wythenshawe.

The committee was also informed that Wi-Fi in all Council public buildings was scheduled for upgrade in the next 18 months and there would also be upgrades to PCs in all libraries. It was confirmed that an upcycling scheme was in place which would recycle the old devices.

In response to a member's suggestion to provide dongles to residents, the Libraries and Archives Lead explained that SIM cards were provided to the Council at no cost from internet service providers but priority cohorts, such as care leavers, were given dongles with a SIM card.

The Libraries and Archives Lead also informed the committee that Digital Health Hubs had been developed to work with GPs and health providers and create leaflets to promote the support available for those struggling to access health services online.

In summarising, the Chair welcomed the recognition that Manchester was the most digitally inclusive city in the UK and the ongoing work to increase digital skills and access amongst residents.

Decision:

That the report be noted.

CESC/24/21 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.