

Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 23 May 2024

Present:

Councillor Simcock (Chair) – in the Chair
Councillors Connolly, Davies, Evans, Glover, Kilpatrick, Kirkpatrick, Noor and Richards

Also present:

Councillor Akbar, Executive Member for Finance and Resources

Apologies: Councillors Brickell, Stogia and Wheeler

RGSC/24/37 Minutes

Decision: That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2024 be approved as a correct record.

RGSC/24/38 Manchester City Council Connections with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)

The committee considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive, Strategic Director (Growth and Development) and City Treasurer which provided an update on Manchester's connections with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) in terms of partnerships, governance, and financial arrangements.

Key points and themes within the report included:

- The historical context behind the establishment of GMCA;
- A summary of previous devolution deals and the current areas of focus given the March 2023 Trailblazer Devolution Deal;
- The impacts of devolution;
- The financial relationship between the Council and GMCA in relation to core funding and grants;
- The governance arrangements in place to ensure robust decision-making at a city region level to support delivery of Manchester's strategic priorities;
- How Manchester City Council was represented at a political level on a range of GM groups including GM Scrutiny Committees; and
- Manchester's asks of Government ahead of the next General Election.

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

- Welcoming the Council's work on delivering Martyn's Law training, and recognising the need to urge government to pass Martyn's Law immediately;

- Noting that the Council was represented on the NHS GM Integrated Care Partnership (ICP) Board and querying when members would receive an update on the GM NHS System Improvement Plan;
- Why the government had not allocated the Homelessness Prevention Grant using the planned formula, which would have provided the Council with greater funding;
- The complexities between what services GMCA and MCC were individually responsible for;
- That GM Scrutiny Committees were often poorly attended and represented by substitute members;
- The potential for a GM-wide taxi licensing service;
- How MCC members could get better access to information at GM-level;
- Whether there was any flexibility in the amount of influence the Council could have through devolution;
- Requesting that step-free access and the extension of the Metrolink to Stockport be included in Greater Manchester's ask of a future government to develop ambitious integrated rail plan for the North;
- Quoting a recent publication on the Devolution Trailblazer, which stated that the majority of councillors in Manchester believed that power remained with local authorities as opposed to the GM Mayor; and
- Whether responsibility for tackling homelessness remained with MCC or GMCA

The Assistant Chief Executive introduced the report and explained the history of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and previous devolution deals, leading to the Devolution Trailblazer which provided greater additional powers to Greater Manchester. He stated that there was significant work underway between GMCA and the ten other Greater Manchester authorities to understand how the devolution deal would be implemented from 2025.

In response to queries, the Assistant Chief Executive explained that Greater Manchester NHS had been placed in Tier 1 of oversight by NHS England and that an improvement plan had been developed to address issues in collaboration with partners. He stated that updates on this were likely to be reported to the Health Scrutiny Committee.

The Assistant Chief Executive also stated that a request to expedite the passing of Martyn's Law could be added to the Council's future asks of government and that the need for this to be included in the wash-up process, where the government decides which bills it wants to prioritise passing before parliament is prorogued, be raised with GMCA to lobby for.

In response to questions regarding the Homelessness Prevention Grant, the City Treasurer stated that a new formula had been prepared by the government which would have resulted in a significant redistribution of funding, but this was not implemented. He explained that the formula specifically related to the Homelessness Prevention Grant and endeavoured to provide further detail outside of the meeting. He stated that the Council was lobbying the government as a major metropolitan centre for additional funding and that, if the formula had been applied, this additional money would have helped with the overall homelessness costs which he

acknowledged had been under significant pressure over the last few years. He provided assurances that the Council made use of other grants to maintain a stable financial position within homelessness, but this was not sustainable.

The Assistant Chief Executive explained that section 4 of the report summarised the responsibilities, powers and functions of GMCA and stated that GMCA was also effective through the soft power of bringing the region's local authorities together and its ability to influence on a greater scale for residents.

The Head of Legal (Governance) explained that there had recently been changes to GMCA's Scrutiny Committees to address some of the issues regarding attendance and use of substitutes. This included a single, larger Scrutiny Committee, raising the profile of being involved in scrutiny at GM-level and the introduction of allowances for members appointed to the GM Scrutiny Committee. He endeavoured to get comparable data on attendance.

In response to a comment regarding a GM-wide taxi licensing scheme, the Executive Member for Finance and Resources stated that he had initiated the process to introduce minimum standards in taxis when he was the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods to improve safety for passengers and to discourage out-of-area private hire operators and he would liaise with the current Executive Member on progress.

The Assistant Chief Executive stated that a list of key officers at GMCA could be developed to help members know who to contact and that the guide on which authority was responsible for specific areas and issues could be updated.

The committee was informed that, as GMCA consisted of the Mayor and 10 Council Leaders, most decisions were made by consensus of representatives across the region. The Assistant Chief Executive explained that a lot of work went on with officers from GMCA and the other authorities.

In response to queries regarding transport, the Assistant Chief Executive endeavoured to include funding for step-free access at train stations in the future asks of government and to liaise with Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) on the expansion of the Metrolink to Stockport.

In response to a question from the Chair regarding which authority was responsible for tackling homelessness, members were advised that most power remained with the local authority, but the GM Mayor had some soft powers to lobby the government on behalf of Greater Manchester for additional funding and could promote a greater public focus on the issue.

The Head of Legal (Governance) explained that care was always taken to ensure that district councils did not lose powers as a result of devolution. He acknowledged that there were some local authority functions of the districts that were exercisable by the combined authority, but that in almost all cases these were exercisable concurrently with the districts, meaning that the districts did not lose the ability to discharge those functions themselves. The only example that he could think of where the combined authority had gained district functions, and the districts were no longer

able to exercise them was in relation to some specific traffic functions. The Executive Member for Finance and Resources highlighted that there was growing evidence as to how devolution had worked for Greater Manchester and its residents but there remained a need for more powers to be devolved from the government to local authorities.

Decision:

That the committee

1. notes the report;
2. requests that the expediting of Martyn's Law becoming law be added to the Council's future asks of government and that the need for this to be included in the wash-up process be raised with GMCA to lobby for;
3. welcomes the offer of further information on the Homelessness Prevention Grant;
4. welcomes the offer of comparable data on attendance rates at GMCA's Scrutiny Committee;
5. recommends that a list of key officers at GMCA be developed to help members know who to contact;
6. requests that funding for step-free access at train stations be included in the future asks of government; and
7. requests that the extension of the Metrolink between East Didsbury and Stockport be included in the future asks of government.

RGSC/24/39 Manchester City Council Connections with the Greater Manchester Integrated Care System and the Manchester Locality

This item was withdrawn from the agenda.

RGSC/24/40 Household Support Fund 5

The committee received a verbal update on the delivery of Household Support Fund 5 grant allocation, which had recently been taken as a Key Decision by the Deputy Chief Executive and exempted from call-in with the approval of the Chair to ensure the timely distribution of funds to residents.

The Executive Member for Finance and Resources informed members that the extension to the Household Support Fund was announced just 25 days before the previous scheme ended and he commended Council officers for their hard work in administering this funding that was vital to residents. He stated that there had been significant lobbying of government to extend the scheme and he placed on record his thanks to the Leader of the Council and Manchester's Members of Parliament (MPs) for their efforts and he also commended the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCSE) organisations that worked with residents experiencing poverty. He expressed his belief that the Household Support Fund was the last line of defence for many vulnerable residents, particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis and lack of adequate funding for local authorities from central government, and that the possibility that this scheme might not have been implemented highlighted the need

for a new government to be elected to listen to, work with and appreciate local government's ability to deliver services.

The Head of Corporate Assessments explained that the current scheme allocated funding for 6 months with money to be spent between 1 April and 30 September 2024, with the Council receiving £6.453m which had been allocated in consideration of other support available such as the Residents at Risk Cost-of-Living group budget. He explained that the Council's focus in administering Household Support Fund 5 (HSF5) was to distribute payments and provide support, with application-based payments also incorporated to meet the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) guidance requirements.

The committee was informed that the Council's delivery of HSF5 focused on free school meal support, which covered the May half-term with a payment of £15 per eligible child being distributed by schools and the summer holidays with a one-off payment of £55 per eligible child. The Holiday Activity Fund in the May half-term would also be supported and a top-up payment of £10 would be made to care leavers. It was stated that Council Tax Support data would be used to identify households in need whilst recognising the difficulty in supporting every household that might require support in response to the cost-of-living crisis.

The Head of Corporate Assessments explained that a payment of £100 would be made to all households on Council Tax Support where one or more resident was known to be in receipt of a disability-related payment, which amounted to approximately 22,000 households. He also explained that a payment of £100 would be provided to households of four or more people on Council Tax Support but where a disability-related payment was not being made. A payment of £90 per household would also be provided to households on Council Tax Support where one or more children lived. Members were advised that only receive one payment would be provided where a household met more than one eligibility criteria.

Payment would be made via BACS where the Council held bank details, which applied to around 8,500 eligible residents, with the Post Office voucher scheme used for the remaining 20,000 eligible residents. The Head of Corporate Assessments provided assurances that this method had proved effective in previous tranches of the Household Support Fund.

Members were also advised that £220k would be allocated to the VCSE sector to enable them to continue supporting hard-to-reach communities across Manchester, £100k would be awarded to the food response scheme to maintain support, and £20k would be given to the Council's Welfare Provision Scheme which was an application-based process and would meet the DWP's guidance requirements whilst supporting those not captured in other cohorts.

The Head of Corporate Assessments advised that there was no guarantee of further Household Support Fund schemes in the future.

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

- Commending officers for their work on administering the Household Support Fund;
- Recognising the instrumental role that the HAF Programme had played in Longsight;
- Highlighting how the late announcement of the scheme impacted the Council's ability to plan its budget and support to residents;
- How successful and secure it was to use the Post Office voucher scheme to administer money to residents.

In response to a query regarding the success and security of using Post Office vouchers, the Head of Corporate Assessments explained that 99% of Post Office vouchers were cashed during the last tranche of the Household Support Fund scheme and that some vouchers were cancelled because the circumstances of a household had changed. He explained that assurances were built into the process of cashing in a Post Office voucher to ensure that the payment was provided to the intended recipient.

In closing the item, the Chair asked the Head of Corporate Assessments to relay the committee's thanks for their work in administering the Household Support Fund and wished them luck going forwards.

Decision: That the verbal update be noted.

RGSC/24/41 Overview Report

The committee received a report of the Governance and Scrutiny Support Unit which provided details of key decisions that fell within the Committee's remit and any items for information previously requested by the Committee. Members noted that a private work programming session would take place following the conclusion of the meeting.

Decision: That the report be noted.