

Communities and Equalities Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 3 September 2024

Present:

Councillor Hitchen (Chair) – in the Chair

Councillors Azra Ali, L Bell, Dar, Doswell, Good, Iqbal, Ogunbambo, Rawson and Whiston

Also present:

Councillor Midgley, Statutory Deputy Leader
Mike Wild, Chief Executive, Macc

Apologies: Councillor Appleby and Sheikh

CESC/24/35 Interests

Councillor Good declared a personal interest in item 5 – Update Report on the Wider Work of the Homelessness Service.

CESC/24/36 Minutes

Decision:

1. That the minutes of the meeting held on 25 June 2024 be approved as a correct record.
2. That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2024 be approved as a correct record.

CESC/24/37 Update Report on the Wider Work of the Homeless Service

The committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) that provided an update on the demand and pressures on the homeless service, alongside the innovative ways in which the service was managing the demand through panels and improved IT access.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background;
- Describing work that was being undertaken to improve the service through the development of additional properties, capital leasing and the private rented sector;
- The approach to cold weather over winter 2024/25;
- The transfer of empty homes from Strategic Housing to the homeless service; and
- The work that was being planned to reduce empty homes in the city.

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

- Welcoming the improvements made;
- If schools could refer pupils at risk of homelessness to the @HOME project;
- The timescale for the @HOME project being rolled out in South Manchester and whether any consideration had been given to working with GP surgeries;
- How many properties could be brought back into use through the work of the Empty Homes team;
- How tenants with addiction issues were supported;
- Noting the impact of temporary accommodation on local communities and services, and querying how this was balanced;
- Whether new temporary accommodation schemes would be located in areas with a current high concentration;
- The cost of privately sourcing properties and the impact of housing benefit rules;
- The potential issue of the long-term leasing scheme inflating prices in the private rented sector;
- Whether service users would be engaged in the introduction of the web-based Customer Portal;
- How many single people were housed in B&Bs for more than six weeks;
- The national trend for temporary accommodation and whether Manchester was bucking this;
- Whether expenditure to source privately sourced accommodation could be better used to purchase properties;
- Recognising the importance of prevention work before a household is evicted; and
- Providing examples of 'hidden homelessness'.

The Statutory Deputy Leader introduced the report and stated that the Council's Homelessness service operated in a challenging landscape but acknowledged that there were positive examples of work, such as the reduction in the number of families temporarily housed in B&Bs for more than 6 weeks which had been maintained since summer 2023. She stated that this type of temporary accommodation was now only used in exceptional circumstances and for short periods, which bucked the national trend. She commented that the service was focused on reducing the number of out-of-area placements and welcomed the new Labour government's commitment to building social housing, tackling homelessness and ending Section 21 evictions.

The Assistant Director of Homelessness highlighted that the use of B&Bs as temporary accommodation was rising in other local authorities and reiterated that Manchester did not have any families housed in B&Bs for more than six weeks. He informed the committee that daily case panel meetings were held to match those presenting as homeless to suitable vacancies in temporary accommodation and these meetings were proving successful. He emphasised the focus on reducing out-of-area placements and stated that the service was proposing to enter into long-term leases for more than 50 properties in Manchester. Several new temporary accommodation services were in development, which would help to house more single homeless people in Manchester rather than out of the city. There was also a focus on helping families experiencing issues with Section 21 evictions and rising rent prices and the service was identifying long-term empty properties which could be brought back into use as temporary accommodation, in a similar scheme to one

implemented by Wigan Council. He acknowledged that rough sleeping in the city remained a challenge but reiterated that daily case panel meetings were helping to match people to temporary accommodation and supported housing.

In response to queries regarding the @HOME project, the Assistant Director of Homelessness confirmed that schools could refer pupils and their families to the programme. He stated that the service was proud of the @HOME project and acknowledged the need to extend this to South Manchester, although a timescale for this could not be provided currently. The Statutory Deputy Leader highlighted the work of Shelter in a school in Chorlton Park and encouraged members to share contact details for schools in their wards which could be passed onto the charity.

The Strategic Lead (Homelessness) advised that the service had begun to explore the potential of informing GP practices and schools of their patients and pupils becoming homeless, with further work needed to understand guidelines around consent and ensuring that IT systems were confidential and compliant with GDPR regulations.

The Assistant Director of Homelessness advised the committee that the Empty Homes team was investigating the ownership status of 870 properties and were in the process of contacting 170 owners. He stated that the Council was working with genealogy firms to identify property owners and they hoped to be able to set a target within the coming months for the number of properties brought back into use. He highlighted Wigan's success in a similar scheme, which had brought 200 properties back into use with 40 of these leased to the Council as temporary accommodation. He also stated that early discussions had taken place with housing providers to assess whether properties could be purchased and used for social housing.

The committee was informed that the net cost of privately sourced properties of £11m related to difference between what the Council paid as rent to landlords and what the Council was refunded through the housing benefit subsidy. The Assistant Director of Homelessness noted the need to negotiate reasonable rents whilst recognising that there were high expectations with this accommodation with regard to management and turnaround times to ensure availability. He reiterated that the Council could only receive 90% of housing benefit capped at the January 2011 Local Housing Allowance rate, which he stated was prohibitive and resulted in the Council incurring additional costs. He stated that the Local Government Association was raising this as a key funding pressure for local authorities with the government and entering into long-term leases would help to enable full cost recovery through housing benefits.

In response to a query regarding support for tenants with addiction issues, the Strategic Lead (Homelessness) highlighted the Council's contract with Change Grow Live, which provided support for substance misuse issues, and stated that the service worked closely with adult social care. She also highlighted the range of temporary accommodation, including abstinence schemes, and stated that an individualised approach was taken with regard to tenants' support needs. Significant work was also ongoing to commission services to support people experiencing domestic violence and at risk of homelessness.

Some members expressed concern over the location of temporary accommodation and the impact that a concentration in specific areas could have on local communities. The Assistant Director of Homelessness explained that the best way to reduce the concentration of temporary accommodation in particular areas was to reduce it in totality. He stated that the number of households in temporary accommodation peaked at 3300 and this was currently at around 2000 households. He said that the long-term leasing of properties would help to spread temporary accommodation across the city but advised that the service was slightly constrained by costs and housing benefit rules, advising members that the maximum Housing Benefit subsidy for privately sourced accommodation was 90% of the Local Housing Allowance rate as at January 2011. Members were advised that different rent levels had been set in the North and South of the city and it was hoped that this would incentivise more properties to become available in south and central Manchester. It was anticipated that it would take a further two years for the long-leasing scheme to be fully operational and impactful. Members requested further information on where temporary accommodation for single households was located in Manchester and where future accommodation might be.

The Strategic Lead (Homelessness) stated that a number of schemes were being implemented in south Manchester to provide temporary accommodation for single people. She emphasised the significant length of time taken to match households to settled accommodation and stated that this often meant that people became settled and comfortable in the area of their temporary accommodation compared to the high turnover of tenants in the private rented sector.

In response to queries regarding the introduction of a web-based Customer Portal, members were advised that this had been successfully used by other local authorities in Greater Manchester and had significantly reduced the demand on telephone calls in those authorities. Officers confirmed that there were no plans to increase the number of call handlers and that the online portal would be promoted to make initial contact with the service. A face-to-face or telephone interview would then be arranged with emergency cases being contacted on the same day. The committee expressed concern regarding this and referenced previous discussions regarding the recruitment of additional call handlers.

It was confirmed that there were 16 single households currently in B&B accommodation compared to a peak of 581, but the 6-week target did not apply to single people. The Assistant Director of Homelessness stated that these people either required wheelchair assistance and were waiting for adapted social housing, had been evicted from other forms of supported housing, or were where the Council had decided not to discharge their duty. He stated that work was needed with partners to review a small but significant group of people for whom supported housing was unsuitable and who did not have capacity to live independently.

With regard to national trends in the number of households in temporary accommodation, the Assistant Director of Homelessness drew the Committee's attention to the table at paragraph 6.8 which demonstrated that the Council's use of temporary accommodation reduced by 20% in the same time period as it increased across England as a whole by 18%.

The Assistant Director of Homelessness expressed concern at the examples of hidden homelessness shared by a member and agreed to raise these with Shelter.

Decision:

That the committee

1. notes the report;
2. requests further information on where temporary accommodation for single people was located in the city; and
3. requests a further update on the Homelessness Service in 12 months' time including an update on progress with the Customer Portal.

CESC/24/38 Domestic Abuse and Homelessness

The Committee considered the report of the Strategic Director (Neighbourhoods) that provided data on people presenting as homeless due to domestic violence and abuse and provided an update on the work undertaken to support them.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background, noting that domestic abuse and violence was one of the top three reasons for homelessness in Manchester;
- Domestic abuse was a significant and strategic priority for the Community Safety Partnership, and its constituent partner agencies and services;
- Statistics that showed the victim/survivor data for all domestic violence and abuse incidents, broken down by ethnicity;
- Statistics that showed the perpetrator/suspect data for all domestic abuse and violence incidents, broken down by ethnicity;
- Manchester comparison to Core Cities data;
- Consideration of the demand for services;
- Information on the Safe Accommodation Duty;
- Information on Commissioned Safe Accommodation;
- Consideration of children affected by domestic abuse and violence;
- Commissioned support services for people affected by domestic abuse;
- Women Rough Sleeping Census;
- The Safer at Home scheme (previously Sanctuary Scheme); and
- Support to help move on into settled accommodation for people who have experienced domestic abuse and violence.

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

- Noting the increase in the number of domestic abuse referrals and querying how this would be addressed;
- Noting that 24% of domestic violence incidents happened in the presence of a child, querying what support services were in place for children witnessing domestic violence;
- Why figures in the report relating to victim/survivor and suspect/perpetrator ethnicity did not add up to 100%;

- Requesting that the language in the report be changed to avoid suggesting that domestic abuse was linked to economic deprivation;
- How the Council and partners interacted with frontline workers responding to domestic violence;
- Whether the Council continued to provide safe rooms in homes under the Safer at Home scheme;
- Querying the possible reasons for the low percentage of Chinese people being assessed as their main reason for being homeless as domestic abuse;
- Work to address female genital mutilation (FGM); and
- If Greater Manchester Police (GMP) informed schools when a child witnessed domestic violence;

The Strategic Lead (Homelessness) explained that domestic abuse was the third highest reason for homelessness in Manchester and that the number of people presenting as homelessness due to domestic abuse from ethnic minority backgrounds was in line with the general population of the city and other Core Cities. She highlighted that there was an increasing level of demand for housing support, but prevention and partnership work was having a positive impact.

In response to members' queries, the Strategic Lead (Homelessness) stated that there had been a significant increase in the number of domestic abuse referrals since the pandemic and explained that the service worked with commissioned and non-commissioned providers across the city. She stated that there were increased levels of domestic violence in specific wards, which she commented could be linked to where families were accommodated after experiencing domestic violence or where there were instances of inter-generational abuse, which was being tackled by the Community Safety Partnership through a thematic review. She noted that people in more affluent parts of the city also experienced domestic violence but might be less likely to report or access the homelessness service, which was being addressed through the Domestic Abuse and Violence Strategy.

The Strategic Lead (Homelessness) also highlighted the work of the Assist project delivered by The Children's Society and referenced in the report, which provided support for children and young people aged 5 to 18 years old who had experienced domestic abuse and were living in temporary accommodation or at home under the 'Sanctuary scheme'.

In response to a query as to why figures in the report relating to victim/survivor and suspect/perpetrator ethnicity did not add up to 100%, members were advised that these were examples of the four most-recorded ethnicities.

The Strategic Lead (Homelessness) explained that strong partnership working was in place through the Domestic Violence and Abuse Partnership Board and regular multi-agency meetings and MARAC risk assessment conferences were held to address specific cases. The Domestic Abuse Reduction Manager stated that this work was governed by the Community Safety Partnership and reiterated that support was offered to adults and children experiencing domestic abuse.

In response to the Chair's query regarding safe rooms, the Domestic Abuse Reduction Manager explained that a new provider had been commissioned with a

focus on personal and property safety and reducing risk from a perpetrator to prevent victims and survivors from becoming homeless as a result of domestic violence. She stated that the Council would purchase and install bespoke safe rooms in a property where appropriate and on an individual basis.

The Domestic Abuse Reduction Manager explained that the Wai Yin charity worked with Chinese and South East Asian residents to provide a bespoke cultural support service. She stated that she had recently met with women to promote the Council's service, but some women expressed that they preferred to seek support from a cultural service due to the wraparound support these offered. Members were advised that Wai Yin was commissioned by Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) as part of their Safe Harbour scheme, so it was recognised that domestic violence did occur within the community, and they were represented on the Victim Voice panel.

In response to a query regarding FGM, the committee was advised that the Council worked with NESTAC to address this, and further detail would be provided in a report in November.

It was also confirmed that GMP had a statutory duty under Operation Encompass to ensure that schools received timely information about police-attended incidents of domestic abuse involving children. The Domestic Abuse Reduction Manager stated that the Council worked closely with GMP to ensure consistency across the city and provided updates to designated safeguarding leads within schools.

Decision:

That the report be noted.

CESC/24/39 Our Manchester Funds Programme Annual Report 2023/24

The Committee considered the report of the Assistant Chief Executive that provided detailed information on the work of the OMVCS Fund and the progress and impact of other grants programmes.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Providing an introduction and background including a description of the scope of the Our Manchester Funds Programme Annual Report;
- Describing the highlights of the 2023/24 report; and
- Next steps.

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

- Commending the work of the Our Manchester Funds programme and team;
- Leadership and development activities for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups;
- How members could be kept informed of organisations in Manchester to signpost residents to;

- What would happen following the end of the Supporting Communities Fund in 2025; and
- Support for VCSE organisations in North Manchester.

The Statutory Deputy Leader highlighted that 119 organisations supporting 127,000 service users had received funding through Our Manchester Funds and the committee were presented with a video which highlighted the impact of this investment.

The Policy and Programmes Manager (Communities & VCSE) explained that the Our Manchester Funds programme had worked with seven BAME-led organisations to address underrepresentation in funding. He stated that the Council was aiming to work with a reference group on an ongoing basis and acknowledged that proportionate funding for BAME groups was a historic issue and that there were opportunities in the funding system to help these organisations.

The Chief Executive, Macc advised members that his organisation's website included a directory of all voluntary and community groups operating in the city and users could search for specific sectors, work, communities and wards. He agreed to share the link to this with members.

The Assistant Chief Executive confirmed that the Supporting Communities Fund would end in April 2025 and a decision had not been made regarding what followed this. He recognised the work and impact of the funding and what it helped to deliver but acknowledged the wider financial challenges facing local government, reminding the committee that budget options would be presented in November.

In response to a query from the Chair regarding support for organisations in North Manchester, the Policy and Programmes Manager (Communities & VCSE) stated that the Our Manchester Fund had supported the outcomes of the North Manchester Inquiry and North Manchester Together Network. He also highlighted the work of the Conversations 2 Cash programme which provided practical support to groups. This work was ongoing and significant progress had been made. The Chief Executive, Macc explained that his organisation was involved in the work of the North Manchester Together Network, and it was a priority for Macc to target available funding in this part of the city.

The Chair asked officers to express the committee's gratitude to all organisations and volunteers who deliver services and support to the city's residents and communities.

Decision:

That the report be noted.

CESC/24/40 VCFSE Infrastructure Contract Quarter 1 Update

The Committee considered the report of the Assistant Chief Executive that described that Manchester had a thriving Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector that was supported by the Council's infrastructure contract delivered

by Macc. The report provided an update on the delivery of the contract during the first quarter of 2024/25.

Key points and themes in the report included:

- Providing an introduction;
- Summarising the background and scope of the contract;
- Outlining progress made against the seven outcome areas against which delivery was monitored and evaluated; and
- Conclusions.

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

- The steps taken to build capacity and future representation on boards and networks; and
- Work with schools and colleges to encourage and promote volunteering.

The Assistant Chief Executive stated that the VCSE Infrastructure Contract was developed through an independent review which highlighted the continued strong demand from the sector for infrastructure support. He stated that the specification was delivered by Macc and aimed to reflect the needs of the VCSE sector in Manchester with seven outcome areas: capacity building; funding support; communication and engagement; collaboration; involvement in decisions; volunteering; and responding to major incidents where required. He stated that each of these outcomes had a strong focus on equalities, diversity and inclusion. These outcomes were monitored through contact management between the Our Manchester Funds teams and Macc on a quarterly basis. He highlighted a stable level of demand compared to previous years and reiterated that the Infrastructure Contract was just one source of support for voluntary organisations. It was recognised that the budget had not increased, and the balance of supply and demand needed to be finely managed in this context.

The Chief Executive, Macc stated that several established boards stopped meeting during the pandemic and Macc's policy team was currently undertaking an audit of all spaces with VCSE representation to identify gaps. He stated that the organisation would be introducing a 'buddy' system to allow future leaders to shadow current representatives, particularly those from ethnic minority communities. A relaunch of Macc's website was scheduled to go live on 16 September and he agreed to circulate further information on this to members.

In response to a query regarding work with schools and colleges, the Chief Executive, Macc highlighted a GM-wide project that was developing leadership training for established and future leaders within the VCSE sector. He stated that this would take a similar approach to Conversations 2 Cash and he also highlighted the work of One Million Mentors, which provided advice to young people on careers in the VCSE sector.

In concluding this item, the Chair requested that officers extend the committee's thanks to all voluntary organisations providing support and services to residents and communities in the city.

Decision:

That the report be noted.

CESC/24/41 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. The committee also received a quarterly performance update for the Manchester Community Safety Partnership for information.

In response to queries, it was confirmed that the Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester had been invited to the meeting in December for the Crime and Policing item and had confirmed her attendance. It was also confirmed that the scope of this report included public confidence levels in Greater Manchester Police.

Decision:

That the report be noted.