

Resources and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 13th November 2008

Present:

Councillor Watson – In the Chair.

Councillors Bhatti, Clayton, Hitchen, Glover, Jones, Morrison, Sandiford, Smith and Trotman.

Present by Invitation:

Councillor Priest, Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources.

Councillor S. Newman, Executive Member for Children and Young People

Unable to be present: Councillors M. Khan, P. Murphy and Brian O'Neil.

RG/08/50 Minutes

Referring to discussion at the previous meeting regarding the accuracy of the figures regarding Disability Discrimination Act audits across the Council's property portfolio, officers reported that the properties were now being agreed with individual ward coordinators prior to circulation to ward councillors. The City Treasurer agreed to check on the tight time-scale being required of Councillors to conclude their part in this work.

Discussion ensued about Neighbourhood Funding Strategy bids. Officer informed the Committee that all members should receive information about the status of each bid in their ward and that ward coordinators would be requested to include this as a regular reporting item on the ward coordination agenda.

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 16th October 2008 as a correct record.

RG/08/51 Manchester Partnership communications

The Committee considered a report of the Chief Executive inviting the Committee to comment on proposals by the Manchester Partnership to improve partnership communications. The Committee recognised that improving partnership communications was one of the priorities for strengthening partnership working identified within the new Local Area Agreement (LAA) and the report submitted set out proposals that had been formulated by the Public Service Board (PSB) and endorsed by the Manchester Board on 21st October, in order that the Committee's views could be fed back to the Public Service Board for consideration.

Members shared the commitment to better partnership communications as a means of fostering a common understanding and purpose across all partners to support the delivery of the better outcomes for Manchester people canvassed in the Community Strategy, however members felt that the report as presented did not sufficiently articulate how the required improvements were going to be achieved.

The proposals to strengthen the partnership's capacity in communications included the establishment of a Partnership Communications Working Group to be led by the Council's Director of Communications with representation from all the organisations that make up the partnership. It was noted by the Committee that interviews for the post of Director of Communications were to take place the day following the meeting. The Committee noted that the priorities to be considered by the Group would include (a) further improving State of the City reporting including reports for communities of interests (b) reviewing the Partnership's Community Engagement strategy (c) improving communication of partnership business to elected Members of the Council, particularly through ward coordination (d) working with RSA on methods of communication to support behaviour change, and (e) distributing communication materials explaining the Community Strategy and LAA for use in partners' mainstream communication processes. Members were keen to establish that there were benchmarking standards in place that drew from 'best in class' comparators, and which would enable improved performance to be effectively measured both from the perspective of the current baseline position and against the comparable performance of others, and that these were to be outlined to the Committee in a further report.

The Committee accepted that making the business of partnerships as transparent as possible also assisted members of the Council in terms of holding partnerships to account, and that alignment of the core thematic partnerships to the relevant overview and scrutiny committees had already been achieved to assist this process. Equally, the Partnership recognised that it could do more to communicate in simple, straightforward and succinct ways what actions have been taken across the Manchester Partnership and to make members of the Council and, where necessary the public, aware of improvements in the City which resulted directly from partnership working. Members highlighted that in terms of communication at democratic level members were still not receiving Partnership Board agendas and reports in a timely way and this added to perceptions that the process was more opaque than transparent. Officers accepted this criticism and renewed the commitment to strengthen links between partnership working and the democratic core.

The Committee was particularly interested to explore the extent to which clear and consistent communication between the partnership and the communities of Manchester contributed to many Community Strategy objectives that seek to influence the attitudes and behaviours of residents and to enable communities to communicate back to influence organisational behaviour. Members indicated that the Council needed to evidence not only that it was prepared to listen to public views but also that their contributions made a difference. The report rehearsed recent work by the PSB with the Royal Society for the Arts (RSA) on changing norms and behaviour, and suggested that there were ways of communicating to achieve behaviour change and an emerging set of communication skills specifically linked to

behaviour change. Officers reported that this was an on-going area of work between the Council and RSA.

A motion not to accept the report and to request officers to submit the report in plain English format as part of the Information and Monitoring report at the next meeting was supported by a majority of the members present and voting.

Decision

1. To decide not to accept the report as it does not articulate in sufficient detail the proposals for action, and to request officers to submit a more detailed report in plain English format as part of the Information and Monitoring report at the next meeting.
2. To request a detailed report on the Communications Strategy, including clarity on implementation, by the end of the current Municipal Year.

RG/08/52 Business Plans

The Committee received a presentation as part of its work to track the development of the 2009/2010 Environmental Services Business Plan. This provided members with an insight into how year on year changes in service dynamics were dealt with as part of the business planning process, and the way that risks were identified and subsequently managed.

Members then discussed with officers issues about the effectiveness of communications within the organisation and with customers, and about performance statistics in relation to cleansing service in each ward. Members challenged that the ward score for cleanliness needed to be more refined and suggested individual scoring for known hotspots within each ward.

Members also highlighted the need for workforce issues to have a higher profile within the Business Plan. This was an issue that was already being centrally monitored following identification that current business plans do not fully engage with the ambitions of the People Strategy and members indicated that they would be looking for clearer linkages in the 2009/2010 plans. The Human Resources sub-group of the Committee is to receive a report assessing the workforce development plan of every draft Business Plan in January 2009. The Chair suggested that this report should be circulated to all Committee members for information after consideration at the Human Resources sub-group meeting and this was agreed by all Members present.

Decision

To note the presentation and to request that a working draft of the 2009/2010 Plan is brought for consideration at the next meeting.

RG/08/53 Sure Start – Quality and Access Grant

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Children's Services about the Quality and Access Grant, a three-year capital grant allocated from April 2008 to March 2011. The Committee noted that £2,179,947 was available every year for three years totalling £6,539,841, and that there was now flexibility allowing unspent grant to be carried over into 2009 and 10. The Authority had a duty to administer the grant but the majority must go to the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sectors. A three-year capital plan included planning for this grant and some improvements to Children's Centres across the city where they meet the conditions of grant.

The quality and access grant is ring fenced to improve access for disabled children to Daycare provision; to improve access to the flexible free entitlement to nursery education; and to improve the delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage indoors and outdoors. More than 50% of the grant must go to the PVI sector. The Committee noted that free entitlement is currently 12.5 hours of nursery education for all three and four year olds delivered as 2.5-hour sessions over five days. The expectation is that by 2009/10 this will increase to 15 hours per week delivered more flexibly. This has implications for smaller providers such as playgroups who may find they are required to provide a mid day meal for children and the grant could therefore be used to improve or provide a kitchen. The delivery of the free entitlement to two year olds in deprived areas will also begin from September 2009.

The Committee welcomed the governance arrangements in place to provide assurance about the use of the grant regime, including the establishment of a capital board reporting to the Deputy Director of Children's Services. The Board would focus on all capital allocations to early years and extended services in schools and provide a strong alignment to the Primary Capital Strategy ensuring that all planning was joined up and underpinned by best value principles.

The Committee noted the detailed work that was in hand to explore many complex issues related to the Council's role in administering the grant to the private, voluntary and independent sector. Key issues being explored were the options for capital works to be carried out in house or through grant hand over, the distribution of equipment, and the arrangements that will need to be in place for asset and risk management. Members were also concerned about the capacity of the PVI sector to spend the whole of the 51% of the total grant earmarked for them. The opportunity to carry forward unspent monies in Year 1 would cushion the impact of non commitment to some degree, but members recognised that the implementation of the grant would require careful monitoring by the officers.

Decision

To note the report and to commend the officers for the good progress that has been made in the arrangements for ensuring the grant is spent in a timely and transparent manner, including arrangements for distributing grant to the PVI sector.

RG/08/54 Information and Overview report

A report of the Chief Executive was submitted providing information about relevant issues affecting the Committee's remit, tracking the implementation of previous decisions and reviewing the forward work programme.

Decision

To note the report.