

Resources and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 3 September 2009

Present:

Councillor Watson - In the Chair
Councillors Bhatti, Clayton, Glover, Jones, McCulley, Morrison, P Murphy and Trotman.

Councillor Andrews – Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services
Councillor Priest – Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources
Councillor Smith – Assistant Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources

Des Morris – Managing Director, Manchester Working Limited
Mike Stevens – Director of Neighbourhood Services, Northwards Housing
Lesley Wallace – Finance Director, Manchester Working Limited
Steve Wood – Director of Business Services, Northwards Housing

Apologies:

Councillor Sandiford

RG/09/51 Urgent Business

The Chair informed the Committee that she had consented to a report on the item 'Manchester Working' being submitted as urgent business.

Decision

To accept this item as urgent business.

RG/09/52 Minutes

Minutes of the meeting of this Committee held on 16 July 2009 were submitted for consideration.

Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Human Resources Sub Group on 30 June 2009 were submitted for information.

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2009 as a correct record of the meeting subject to the removal of Councillor Clayton from the list of apologies.

RG/09/53 Information and Overview Report

A report of the City Solicitor was submitted. The report tracked the implementation of previous recommendations from the Committee and included an overview of the Council's forward plan as it related to the Committee's remit.

The Forward Plan included a decision to install a freestanding live screen to show the 2010 Olympics. The Head of Procurement advised that there had been complications in selecting an appropriate site for the screen and a new site was being sought.

The Forward Plan also included a decision relating to land for the Irish World Heritage Centre. The Committee asked for further information about this decision.

Decision

1. To note the report and accept the Committee's work programme.
2. To request that an information note on land for the Irish World Heritage Centre is added to the agenda for the Committees next Information and Overview report.

RG/09/54 Local Area Agreement: Quarterly Performance Report 1

The Committee received a report from the Assistant Chief Executive (Performance) including a summary of performance of all the targets in Manchester's Local Area Agreement (LAA).

The Chair had asked the Strategic Director of Children's Services to attend the meeting to provide an overview of what work was being done through the Manchester Partnership to address the targets marked as red that related to the achievement and well-being of children in the city. Current performance information indicated that any target marked red would not be hit without intervening action.

The Strategic Director of Children's Services commented that a Performance Board had been set up for the Children's Board (the Thematic Partnership of the Manchester Partnership that related to children in Manchester). This has been stood down by the Department for Children Schools and Families as they were now satisfied that the Children's Board was sufficiently robust to lead multi-agency work to bring about better outcomes for children. There was also a strong Safeguarding Children's Board which aimed to ensure that public services acted decisively when children were under threat.

In relation to the target for the number of Looked After Children (LAC) the Strategic Director commented that the department had been trying for seven years to push down the numbers, and had had some successful periods and others where numbers did not fall. Manchester had a comparatively high number of LAC, even compared to other authorities who had similarly high levels of deprivation. The number of placements impacted on the Council's budget but the section was committed to taking children into care when there was a risk. The Council was working with its partners to address the factors that influence the level of looked after children, such as alcohol consumption, drug dependency, mental health and domestic abuse. The Strategic

Director commented that often public services worked with families in the city and supported them to resolve some of the challenges they faced, and then they moved out of the city and a new family facing different challenges replaced them.

In relation to other targets the Assistant Director (Manchester Education Partnership) commented that the Council benefited from good levels of engagement with schools through the Behavior and Attendance Partnership. A Headteacher had been seconded to the partnership to provide expert advice on improving attendance rates. Levels of absence from sickness were similar to national averages but absence for other reasons was much greater. Services were working with families to understand and address the underlying causes of absence from school. The Council was also committed to treating persistent absence from primary school as neglect.

Members noted that a demography of the LAC population was being developed. The Committee referred to the Executive Member working group that had undertaken a piece of work on Population Change. The piece of work did not support the conclusion that the city's high turnover in population is a major factor influencing the level of deprivation, but rather it found that poverty is also commonly found in communities where there is low population turnover.

The Strategic Director responded that the demography was being developed to strengthen the Council's intelligence on LAC including what factors influence whether children become looked after. It was important that public services were alert to the physical, behavioral and cognitive signs that indicate the types of challenges and problems young people might face later in life, and that children might need to be taken into the care of the local authority. Sure Start Centres provide a good opportunity to spot these signs early when intervention would be most effective. Members commented that midwives would also pick up these signs at an early stage.

The Chair commented that it appeared that the Children's Board was robust in its oversight of the LAA targets, however in order to discover and react to the signs that indicate children may experience problems later in life, full support from our NHS partners was necessary. She stressed the importance of active Health Visitors in achieving this. The Strategic Director commented that it was important that spotting and addressing these signs was a priority for GPs and Health Visitors.

Turning their attention to the other LAA targets in the report, members asked whether the targets for Net Additional Homes Provided and Delivered (NI 154 and 155) were achievable, and whether they would be revised. Members noted that target NI151, Employment Rate, was also underperforming and appeared to have little chance of recovery in the short term.

The Director of Housing commented that target NI 154 would now not be hit, and whilst the target was realistic and achievable when it was set the economic climate had changed this. A deadline of November had been set to discuss reviewing the target with Government Office North West. The Programme Manager (Performance) commented that a refresh of LAA targets would take place between December 2009 and March 2010.

Decision

1. To recommend to the Safeguarding Children's Board that they ensure that local NHS partners are fully engaged in detecting the signs that young children show that they are at risk of being taken into care to protect them from harm so that early action can be taken to address these problems, and sharing this information.
2. To pass the minute of this decision to the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee for information.

[Councillor P Murphy declared a personal interest as Chair of the Greater Manchester Police Authority]

RG/09/55 Northwards Housing

A report of the Director of Housing was submitted which set out the governance, financial position and performance of Northwards Housing. The Committee welcomed Mike Stevens, Director of Neighbourhood Services and Steve Wood, Director of Business Services at Northwards Housing.

Mr Wood outlined the role of Northwards Housing. Northwards Housing Limited is an arms length management organisation (ALMO) established by the Council in December 2005. The company manages council housing in North Manchester. It is currently delivering housing management services and a major home improvement programme under a five-year management agreement. Northwards has been inspected twice by the Audit Commission; in June 2006 and November 2008. At the last Inspection Northwards achieved a rating of "3 stars with excellent prospects for improvement".

Members who represented constituents in North Manchester commented that they had had very positive feedback on Northwards over the past 12 months. A Councillor commented that the company should take care to plant appropriate trees around the houses, as some problems had been caused by planting woodland trees on streets.

The Chair referred to Northwards Governance Arrangements, and asked the representatives to comment on why they had decided to appoint a Governance Officer and what impact this had had. Mr Wood commented that their Governance Officer had been introduced to ensure Board meetings ran smoothly and was connected to the views of Northwards residents. He and Councillor Trotman, a Board Member of Northwards Housing, commented that she was a great asset to the board and highly valued by them.

Members noted that Northwards communicated with other Registered Social Landlords to share good practices in governance and other areas.

Decision

To congratulate Northwards Housing on their good performance and methods of operation.

[Councillor P Murphy declared a personal interest as a Ward Councillor for Moston]
[Councillor Trotman declared a personal interest as a Director of Northwards Housing]

RG/09/56 Manchester Working

A Report of Manchester Working Limited was submitted providing an overview of the governance, performance and financial strategy for the company, and how these impact and support the long-term sustainability of the joint venture business. The Committee welcomed Des Morris, Managing Director and Lesley Wallace, Financial Director from Manchester Working.

Mr Morris outlined the role of the company in carrying out maintenance work to Northwards Housing and other Registered Social Landlords and maintaining the Council's public building portfolio.

Members praised the organisation for its sound running, and the positive feedback they had received from residents. They felt the challenge for the company would now be to improve the productivity of its workforce and reduce the overhead to win new work in the competitive open market.

Decision

To congratulate the company on its successful operation and to request an update on its operation in a year's time.

[Councillor Trotman declared a personal interest as a Director of Northwards Housing]
[Councillor P Murphy declared a personal interest as a member of the Board which controlled the transfer from Direct Works to Manchester Working Limited]
[Councillor Morrison declared a personal interest as a member of City South Housing Trust]

RG/09/57 Use of External Consultants and Agency Staff

A report of the City Treasurer was submitted appraising members of the work of the Temporary Staff Group (TSG) and expenditure on consultants and agency staff over time.

The Head of Procurement advised the Committee that practices in recruiting consultants and agency staff varied across the Council in nature and quality. The Group was looking at introducing a gateway process to get better control over recruiting and retaining temporary staff, and ensuring competitive processes are used to do so. The Group was aware that different areas of the Council had different business needs and that new processes would have to be flexible to meet those

needs. The Head of Procurement was encouraged that other organisations and expressed interest in the work of the TSG and were looking to emulate it.

Members asked why there was such a high number of vacant posts in the Directorate for Transformation, and what the target was for expenditure on consultants and agency staff in future years. The Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources advised that the Directorate was a rapidly evolving section of the Council, and it had currently created a number of new posts necessary to deliver the Transformation agenda. Now these posts have been established a recruitment process would occur to fill the posts. The Head of Procurement advised that the Group had targeted a reduction in expenditure of £0.5M each year.

The Committee asked what financial impact the need to bring in extra IT support from Microsoft had had. The Head of ICT advised that Microsoft support had cost £0.5M; during this time additional IT staff members were also required to support Microsoft's work to address the virus.

Members also queried whether the gateway process would allow urgent recruitment where this was necessary. The Personnel Advisory Team Manager answered that once a brief had been received to recruit temporary staff to the post the new process could be completed within a week.

Members noted that there was some fluidity in recruiting people from Manchester Temps but sought reassurance that this would not be abused, and that temporary staff would not be recruited when this represented the easiest solution rather than the best one. The Personnel Advisory Team Manager advised that Manchester Temps employed recruitment advisors who would speak to the section that was hiring temporary staff and discuss what other options are available to them that might be better.

The Chair noted that the report stated that in some cases staff were hired to fill vital gaps in critical services where there is a statutory obligation to provide a service. The Chair accepted that this was necessary, but in the example of social care for children it was important to have a stable and high quality staff base that is able to spot risks to children at an early stage when intervention is most effective. To support the recommendation the Committee made in RG/09/54 (LAA Quarterly Performance Report) she requested that the TSG looks at how the Group can ensure stability in this area. The Personnel Advisory Team Manager advised that the Council did recruit temporary social workers in a different way, and had a register of workers who could fulfill a role for a longer period of time. Extra care would also be taken when recruiting to temporary posts to ensure that these posts were definitely of a temporary nature, and that there was no need for permanent support.

The report recommended that there was still work to be done to embed the use of the gateway across the Council and the committee may wish to delegate the overseeing of this work to the Overview and Scrutiny Human Resources Sub Group. The Committee agreed to do this.

Decision

1. To stress the need for stability and high quality amongst social workers in Children's Services so that they are able to spot risks to children at an early stage when intervention is most effective, and the need for temporary staffing arrangements in this area to support this.
2. To delegate the overseeing of the implementation of the temporary staff gateway process to the Overview and Scrutiny Human Resources Sub Group.

RG/09/58 Business Plans

A joint report of the Deputy Chief Executive (Performance) and City Treasurer was submitted outlining the Council's business planning process for 2010-2013. The Committee were invited to select business plans to look at in their next meeting.

Decision

The Committee selected the following plans: -

- Legal Services
- Democratic Services
- Communication
- Sports and Leisure
- ICT
- Business Change