Resources and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 19th June 2008

Present:
Councillor Watson – In the Chair.
Councillors Clayton, Hitchen, Jones, Morrison, Paul Murphy, Brian O’Neil (part), Sandiford, Smith and Trotman.

Present by Invitation:
Councillor Leese, Leader of the Council
Councillor Cowell, Executive Member for Environment.

RG/08/31   Urgent Business

The minutes of the Governance Sub Group on 12 June 2008 were submitted for consideration as urgent business.

Decision

To agree to receive the minutes of the meeting of the Governance Sub Group on 12 June 2008 as urgent business so that the recommendations arising from the Sub Group could be considered by the Committee.

RG/08/32   Minutes

The Chair advised that the Governance Sub-Group had met on 12 June 2008 and had undertaken detailed scrutiny of proposals for the future governance of the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA). These proposals had been considered by the Executive on 28 May and would be submitted to the City Council for approval on 9 July.

A member expressed concern about the new structure and felt that this would lead to a democratic deficit in decisions taken at AGMA level. The Leader of the Council advised that changes to AGMA governance arrangements had been devised to promote greater openness and transparency. Decisions taken by the AGMA Executive would also be subject to formal scrutiny by elected members of the ten Greater Manchester authorities.

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 22 May 2008 as a correct record.
To endorse the recommendations of the Governance Sub-Group and to approve the minutes of its meeting of 12 June 2008.

**RG/08/33  District Public Service Boards**

A report of the Chief Executive was submitted seeking members’ views on the involvement of members in the delivery of the Community Strategy and Strategic Regeneration Frameworks in each area of the city.

The Leader of the Council advised that the proposals had been developed following a review of the operation of District Public Service Boards. This review had been undertaken in response to recommendations of the Resources and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2007 regarding the inclusion of democratically elected Members in the District Public Service Board process.

The review had concluded that District Public Service Boards had usefully promoted a culture of partnership working amongst agencies. However there was no need for partnership working to be organised formally on a district basis due the existing policy framework of the city-wide Community Strategy and neighbourhood focused delivery though ward co-ordination. It was therefore proposed that District Public Service Boards should be discontinued and that an alternative mechanism should be introduced to involve members.

The Committee considered proposals to convene two meetings per year for all members of each Strategic Regeneration Framework Area. The purpose of these meetings would be to enable democratically elected members to identify and monitor the delivery of the Strategic Regeneration Framework, Community Strategy and Local Area Agreement targets in that area. Meetings would be chaired by the Leader and Deputy Leaders of the Council in accordance with their portfolio responsibilities. The first meetings would be held between July and September. Officer attendance would be determined in accordance with issues on the agenda.

It was emphasised that these meetings would complement ward co-ordination as the primary delivery mechanism for neighbourhood working whilst providing additional flexibility to address those issues that do not fall neatly within district ward boundaries, such as worklessness and would also progress issues that could not be resolved by individual services or partnerships. Children’s District Services Board meetings would continue.

A member advised that such arrangements had already been implemented successfully in North Manchester and that this had provided an additional forum for ward councillors to focus upon the delivery of the Strategic Regeneration Framework.

**Decision**

1. To commend to the Executive:

   That the Chief Executive be requested to convene two meetings per year for each of the areas covered by Strategic Regeneration
Frameworks for all Members of the Council representing Wards within each framework area for the purpose of monitoring progress on the implementation of Community Strategy, Local Area Agreement (LAA) and Strategic Regeneration Framework objectives in that part of the City.

That arrangements for joint work between Council officers and officials from partner agencies be organised on the basis of the projects and tasks which need to be administered to deliver the priorities agreed within the Community Strategy, the LAA and the Strategic Regeneration Frameworks.

2. To request that these meetings are convened as soon as possible and that information about meetings is circulated to all members of the Council.

**RG/08/34 Information and Overview Report**

An updated version of the Information and Overview Report was submitted to provide members of the Committee with information about relevant issues affecting the Committee’s remit.

The report contained further information requested by the Committee at its May meeting on key decisions on the Manchester Partnership Fund, disposal of land at Water Street and Regent Road, the priorities of the Manchester Board and Public Service Board and the implementation of the Ward Co-ordination Review. The report also provided information about proposed key decisions within its remit set out in the Executive Forward Plan, and updated the Committee on progress on the implementation of its previous recommendations.

The Chair advised that the four delivery projects identified by the Public Service Board to strengthen partnership working – commissioning, value-led improvement, communication and partnership governance - had been incorporated into the Committee’s 2008/9 work programme.

In responding to a range of queries raised by members regarding the implementation of the review of ward co-ordination, the Assistant Chief Executive (Performance) advised that Regeneration Managers would have responsibility for progressing issues affecting more than one ward and would be supported by members of the Public Service Board. Officer attendance at ward co-ordination meetings would be determined by Ward Councillors in accordance with items to be considered at the meeting and arranged by the Ward Co-ordinator.

**Decision**

To note the report.

[Councillor Paul Murphy declared a personal interest as a member of the Manchester Board.]
RRG/08/35 Pest Control Charges

The Committee considered the key decision of the Strategic Director of Neighbourhood Services on 12 May to increase pest control treatment charges, which had been called in for further scrutiny by Councillors Shannon, Cameron, Jones, Eakins, Sandiford, Commons and Ashley in accordance with Paragraph 13 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules.

The terms of the call in were that ‘The Council is proposing an 18% increase in charges for treating mice infestations, a 25% increase in dealing with wasps and a 164% increase in the cost of tackling ‘other pests’ including beetles. We would ask councillors on the Resources Scrutiny Committee to investigate the proposed charging regime for this vital public service, local residents want to know how such above-inflationary increases can possibly be justified.’

A report of the Strategic Director of Neighbourhood Services was submitted providing background information to the decision.

Councillor Jones expanded on the reasons for the call-in and asked whether demand would shift from Council services to commercial services, and whether a free service, similar to the model offered by Liverpool City Council would be beneficial to the city. Other members asked how low-income households would be affected if they had an infestation.

The Committee was advised that there was no statutory duty to provide a pest control service. However the City Council recognised the public health benefits of providing an affordable and accessible pest control service and for this service to be maintained at an affordable level to encourage residents to control pests at their premises and for public health to be protected.

The actual cost of carrying out treatments is significantly higher than the charges currently levied. Income from commercial contracts has contributed to the cost of carrying out this heavily subsidised service. This had enabled programmed proactive public health work to be undertaken, however the commercial contracts market is extremely competitive and the anticipated level of income from this source has not been sustained over recent years. The Committee was also informed that the Council uses targeted rather than broad-spectrum pesticides that are less harmful to humans, pets and the environment. However this does have implications for the costs of the service. Members asked for available information relating to the level of income from commercial contracts.

The Head of Regulatory and Enforcement Services advised that officers were aware of the impact of pest control charges on low-income families and would use discretion to waive charges in exceptional circumstances. The point was also made that if the City Council did not provide this service, which it has no statutory duty to do, then the alternative for residents, irrespective of how low their income, would be the much higher rates charged by the private sector pest control companies. Where families were in rented accommodation, it is the landlord’s responsibility to take action to control pest infestations in their land or property. Members were advised they could contact relevant officers in cases where exceptional circumstances existed.
Overall, the Committee expressed its support for the increase and that the cost represented exceptionally good value for money; the increase in costs was however overdue.

**Decision**

To support and endorse the key decision of the Strategic Director of Neighbourhood Services to increase charges and the public health benefits they will bring about.

Councillors Clayton, Jones and Sandiford requested that the record show that they voted against this resolution.

**RG/08/36 Annual Update on Performance in the Revenues and Benefit Unit**

A Report of the City Treasurer was submitted updating members on performance statistics in the Revenue and Benefits Unit. The headline statistics included a 1.8% increase on collection in 2007/8 and £7.1 million of Council Tax collected from monies owed from previous years. The report also included detail on changes to legislation and the benefits inspection and performance regime.

Members welcomed the progress identified in the report, and the robust approach taken to ensure that the single person’s discount on Council Tax was properly administered. Members questioned whether the target of 25 days to process a new benefit claim was realistic, and whether the number of court summonses issued could be decreased. Members also asked what was being done to ensure vulnerable residents in the city didn’t lose out as a result of proposed changes to the backdating rules for Housing and Council Tax Benefits.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits advised that progress towards the target would be brought about by engaging older people and by encouraging Registered Social Landlords to work with tenants to help produce relevant documentation and speed up the process. She advised that the Council was committed to reducing the number of court summonses issued by encouraging payment by direct debit.

In relation to proposed changes to backdating rules for Housing and Council Tax Benefits, she advised that if the changes were introduced residents would be contacted if they could make a claim to ensure they did so as early as possible.

Members requested further information regarding timescales for processing claims from initial receipt to when the case is assessed. The Head of Revenues and Benefits also undertook to provide further information about levels of Council Tax arrears in each ward.

**Decision**

1. To welcome the increased levels of Council Tax collection achieved over 2007/08 despite the challenging circumstances.
2. To welcome the approach of the unit to safeguard vulnerable residents from losing out financially from the proposed changes to the Housing and Council Tax Benefits backdating rules.

3. To request that officers follow up the requests for further information.

**RG/08/37 Sure Start Children’s Centre Capital Programme**

Consideration was given to a report of the Director of Children’s Services updating members on progress with the Children’s Centres Capital Programme. The Deputy Director of Children’s Services outlined the programme, highlighting that phase one had seen the delivery of 12 new children’s centres and that phase two had seen a further 13 centres introduced either by the construction of new premises or refurbishing existing buildings. The government has announced funding of £1.9 million to refurbish and enhance Sure Start centres in locations to be decided based on existing coverage and levels of deprivation.

Members welcomed the spread of Sure Start Children’s Centres across the city but commented that capacity in some areas of the city fell short of the population of under 5s, and that the Academies programme would also affect the locations where Sure Start services could be accessed. The Deputy Director of Children’s Services advised that delivery of Sure Start services would spread out and be available from a variety of locations in each ward which would address these pressures.

Members asked how the expenditure of the £6.6 million allocated to improving the quality and access to early years learning would be spent and who would oversee it. The Deputy Director of Children’s Services advised that the programme of expenditure had yet to be drawn up but would be reported to the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee as soon as possible as part of the Committee’s general oversight of the Early Years Review. This information would also be reported to the Resources and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee pursuant to its role in monitoring capital expenditure.

**Decision**

1. To endorse the process for expenditure of resources allocated to phase 3 of the programme; and

2. To request that the Director of Children’s Services provide further information about the proposals for the Quality and Access Grant.

**RG/08/38 Work Programme**

At its meeting on 22 May 2008, the Resources and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested that the Chair, in conjunction with relevant Officers, devise a draft work programme based on the priorities identified by Members of the Committee.
A copy of the work programme was submitted.

**Decision**

1. To approve the work programme for 2008/09

2. To agree that an updated version should submitted to each meeting as part of the Information and Overview Report to enable the Committee to manage its workload effectively