

## **MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETINGS FEBRUARY 2015**

I attended last week's MCC Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting on the 11<sup>th</sup> February (unfortunately I missed the morning Economy Scrutiny Committee due to work commitments). I hope this report may be of use to some of you. As usual, I'm happy for material in it to be forwarded to other interested parties, with the proviso that it's my interpretation of events and details may not necessarily be completely accurate.

The **COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (CSC)** was supplemented by Cllr Sue Murphy (Deputy Leader), Cllr Flanagan (Exec member for Finance and HR); Cllr Newman (Exec member for Children's Services) and Cllr Davis (Economy Scrutiny Committee).

The meeting was unusual in that public attendees were only let into the Committee room just before the meeting, accompanied by 'security'. The reason was a large contingent of both supporters and opponents of the first item on the agenda.

### **1. Agenda item 5 Petition to fly the Palestinian flag above the Town Hall for the Children of Gaza.**

The Council had received a petition of over 1000 signatures, hence consideration of this item. The Chair, Cllr Rawlins (efficient as usual) allowed two speakers 5 minutes each to put their points. Mr Mark Krantz, a Chorlton resident who is of Jewish heritage, opened with the statement that over 2000 people had signed the petition and he stressed that the aim of flying the flag was to express solidarity with the children in Gaza affected by the recent hostilities. The petition calls for the Palestinian flag to be flown for just one day. He went on to tackle possible objections to the proposal. One of these is that the Palestinian/Israel situation is none of Manchester's business, but he pointed out Manchester has 'taken sides' in past political struggles such as an anti-apartheid stance to the past situation in S.Africa. Another possible objection was that it would cause trouble between supporters of Palestine and Israel in Manchester. He pointed out that the flag has already been flown from Town Halls in Edinburgh, Bradford, Glasgow, Preston and elsewhere, without any problems

Mr Raphi Bloom (RV – MGP had exchanges of views with him last year) of the Manchester Friends of Israel, spoke against the flag flying. He said that in 3 out of 4 cities where the flag had already been flown, there is no significant Jewish community and pointed out that over 3300 people had signed a petition to the Council not to fly the flag. He contended that flying the flag would indicate Manchester 'taking sides' in the situation. He also referred to the demonstrations by supporters of both sides of the situation on King Street last summer, which had not got out of hand thanks to the efforts of the Police and the Council. His concern was that flying the flag would increase tension between communities and that Council support would appear unbalanced to Jewish residents. Finally he quoted the Equalities Act 2010 and said this required an equalities audit before the flag could be flown.

Cllr Sue Murphy then spoke on behalf of the Council. She said that MCC receives requests to fly various flags on a regular basis, but only flies the Union and English flags on a daily basis, except for events specific to Manchester, such as for the Irish festival or Commonwealth Day, in accordance with Government Protocol. Cllr Fletcher-Hackwood then proposed the Council stick to the Government Protocol, seconded by Cllr Ali and agreed unanimously by Committee members.

Their recommendation will go forward to the full Council meeting. The public area of the room then cleared quickly, with a couple of petition supporters shouting their disappointment with the decision of the Committee. This left me as the only member of the public attending the rest of the meeting!

## **2. Agenda item 7. All Age Disability Strategy.**

This started with opening comments by Flick Harris and John Burke from Manchester Disabled Peoples' Action Group. Flick covered items she had fed back onto the MCC strategy group, including neighbourhood renewal, the website, and inaccessible formats of printed information. These were areas where she complained of poor performance by the Council. She would like to see better co-ordination across Council departments on disability and impairment issues and offered help with this.

Zoe Robertson, lead commissioner for Disability (RV – presumably an MCC officer) then gave a presentation about the strategy report, which had been 'co-produced' with Manchester residents and stakeholders. There was quite a lot of preamble on the methodology of compiling the report. The aim is to finalise the strategy by next April (RV-2016?). Zoe's colleague Mike went on to talk about the findings of the co-production process. This had involved 'engagement' with 200 disabled people and their carers.

After Cllr Newman had droned on to no obvious point for several minutes, Dave Carty, MCC's City Centre Development Manger offered to answer members' questions. Cllr Paul Murphy and others made comments on the problems of the new Lloyd Street layout for disabled (apparently there are trip hazard issues), disability provision at events (e.g. inaccessible disabled toilet at Gay Pride), information on disability consultation events, and when there will be an internal event promoting the disability strategy to MCC staff (likely April 2015). The Chair concluded with the observation that more needs to be done to overcome these and other related issues.

Discussion then moved on to rail transport issues highlighted in the report. A Transport person (RV – from TfGM) said that responsibility is divided between DfT, Network Rail and TfGM. He pointed out that access issues not only include steps for wheelchairs but also lack of visible train information for people hard of hearing, and announcements for those passengers with sight problems. Cllr Paul stated that only 42 out of 96 stations in GM have level access, which he considered a disgrace. Cllr Paul Murphy and Cllr Cookson supported him, citing several problems for disabled passengers at their local stations, Moston and Levenshulme respectively. The TfGM person noted Moston station crops up frequently in discussions on access and availability of passenger space. Cllr Andrews considered that these and similar issues are as much about attitude as finance and the strategy is long overdue, a view supported by the Chair. (RV – it was clear to me that several members have a similar view to transport campaigners with respect to TfGM's poor performance).

## **3. Item 6 Equalities Work.**

No report was available to the public on this item. Cllr Cookson spoke about attending events mentioned in the report, such as Holocaust Commemoration, the Pankhurst Centre and Gay Pride. He asked that mistakes made re disability issues at these be rectified in future (he was of the opinion they were due to cock-up rather than deliberate mistakes). An officer pointed out that MCC doesn't run some of these events, but acts as a 'partner' to the organisers. Flick Harris spoke

again about serious issues MCC hasn't dealt with, such as breaches of the Equality Act and Building Regulations. The Chair was quite curt with her, asking her to stick to the agenda (RV – Flick failed to make any valid points in my view). Flick asked MCC to involve other Equality and Disability groups and the Chair acknowledged these were cross-cutting themes.

#### **4. Item 8 Budget Report.**

Cllr Flanagan joined the table for this item. The budget pack information had been circulated to members electronically and was tabled at the meeting and available to the public. Cllr Sue Murphy said many relevant items are in the Childrens' budget document. The Chair commented that the only significant change is the recommendation not to implement removal of free swimming for certain groups of residents (RV- does mean advice services will close down, as forecast at the last meeting, or was some agreement reached?). Cllr Flanagan said he was well aware of representations from members of the community, having attended 23 Scrutiny Committee meetings so far on budget issues. (RV – it looks like the final decisions will be made at the Executive meeting this Friday 13<sup>th</sup> February).

Cllr Paul Murphy asked if the Executive will review the cuts when the economy picks up. The discussion diverged briefly onto the Council trying ensure Manchester residents get the benefit of Council contracts with respect to local employment. Cllr Sue Murphy stated that the Council's policy is that 'entry level' jobs in the Council are reserved for residents with an M postcode. She also mentioned the procurement policy etc that 'evidences' this initiative. Cllr Cookson questioned the legality of the M postcode policy for entry level jobs. Cllr Sue Murphy responded that it has been a policy for some time and MCC had rebuffed a complaint about it from Rochdale MBC in the past.

The Committee was happy to agree the budget proposals, which would now go forward to the Executive.

#### **5. Item 9 Overview Report.**

This report was available to the public at the meeting. Cllr Cookson asked a question about an item on page 19 on Democratic Engagement. (RV - This states: 'The Electoral Registration Officer will pilot the inclusion of postal vote applications with annual canvass forms in the Moss Side ward at the next annual canvass, which will run from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013-17<sup>th</sup> February 2014. An item for information detailing the outcome of this pilot will be submitted for the Committee's consideration early in the next municipal year') An MCC officer apologised for not having the information to respond to this question (RV – need to check this in the official meeting minutes).

The meeting finished early at 1530hrs.

Dick Venes  
Hon. Secretary, Manchester Green Party.

17<sup>th</sup> February 2015.