

## Manchester City Council Scrutiny Committee meetings December 2014

I attended this week's MCC Economy and Communities Scrutiny Committee meetings. I hope this report may be of use to some of you. 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 **Economy Scrutiny Committee** (ESC) was back to its usual venue in the Town Hall. I got the impression the meeting might be a little contentious as the usual Councillor attendees were supplemented by Cllr Leese (Council leader), Cllr Sue Murphy (deputy leader) and Cllr Flanagan (Exec member for Finance and HR). Public attendance was minimal – I was the only person there for the whole meeting.

1. The Committee noted the minutes of a task and finish group on the Living Wage (held on 1/12/14) without comment. Tabled minutes of the meeting showed it had been addressed by outside persons, including: Tom Skinner of the Living Wage for GM Campaign, Alan Wort of Equality NW and Christian Spence from the Manchester Chamber of Commerce. The meeting had discussed: the wider economic impact of the Living Wage, including consideration of the impact of the Council specifying it in procurement contracts; the Living Wage in relation to Agency workers; the long term impact; and healthy work. However, the topic did not appear to be 'finished' as the notes showed no significant decisions were made!

2. Most of the Scrutiny Committee meeting was taken up with a consideration of reports for resolution on the 2015/17 Budget Options and 2015/17 Budget Options for the Corporate Core. The latter report contained a lot of detail on costs and possible reduction of workforce on different areas of the Council's activities. The Chair of the Committee stated the task of the Economy Scrutiny Committee was to identify 'key lines of enquiry' for the January 2015 meeting.

Discussion commenced with some Councillors unhappy that the Corporate Core report had been forwarded to them very late, with the result that they had not been able to consider it properly. An officer said (unconvincingly in my view) this had been because they had had trouble cutting down a long list. One Councillor was concerned that the report stuck to financial matters and did not identify real life impacts likely to be caused by the options.

After Cllr Karney had made a brief Party Political Broadcast on behalf of the Labour Party to the citizens watching on the webcast, on the budget option problems being all the fault of the Conservative government, the Committee considered various budget cut options in the report. These covered the areas of:

- Marketing Manchester Tourist Information;
- Reform and Innovation;
- Neighbourhood Focus/Regeneration;
- Galleries and Cultural Grants;
- Early Help;
- Early Years;
- Adult Education Services.

I don't propose to go through each section in any detail, but some of the points discussed by Councillors were as follows:

- Cllr Flanagan pointed out early on that the Scrutiny Committee members were not able to make any decisions on options – these will be made by the executive with input from all the Committees and the public consultation on budget options.
- Two Councillors were concerned at the possible unintended consequences of cut options.
- Another concern was the loss of skills and expertise of Council employees losing their jobs as a result of the cuts, which might be difficult to recover in the future (RJV comment: well recognised in the private sector).
- On the 'Reform and Innovation' section, several councillors pointed out they had no idea of what the 3 options presented represented what work might not be done. Cllr Leese was not able to provide a succinct explanation.
- This led to a comment by several Councillors about the quality of information in this section of the report in particular. One expressed the view that he was not sure if it was deliberate that the three options were not understandable or that they were just 'loosely worded'. One Councillor re-iterated that the Committee had previously asked for examples of what various departments do but this had not been provided. They noted this was especially true where Council employees are not in 'face to face' contact with Councillors. At this point it was clear that several of the Committee members were dissatisfied with the quality of information in the reports. (RJV comment – if Councillors cannot understand it how can members of the public be expected to make worthwhile contributions to the online 'consultation'?).
- At one point Cllr Leese did mention the option of reducing the grant to the National Football Museum(!), without further discussion.
- On the Galleries and Cultural Grants section one Councillor said they had never heard of half the bodies receiving grants. When the Chair tried to move the discussion on by saying this should be left to another Scrutiny Committee (see Communities Scrutiny Committee report below), some Councillors complained that grants also have an economic impact so should be considered by the ESC.
- At various points in the discussions, Councillors repeated their requests for information on actual impact of the cut options as well as just financial figures.

Finally, the Chair went through the items that will be brought back to the January 2015 meeting of the Economy Scrutiny Committee.

The **Communities Scrutiny Committee** (CSC) was something of a contrast. There was a very large public attendance, which subsequently turned out to be composed of representatives of the voluntary and community sector bodies whose grant funding budget options were part of the meeting's agenda. Cllrs Flanagan (again) and Sue Murphy attended in addition to the usual Committee members.

#### 1. Equality Framework for Local Government.

Verbal report by a Senior Officer. No printed report was tabled. Nothing of interest.

#### 2. Sexual Orientation Monitoring.

This item was concerned with this issue internally within the Council and externally via provision of services. Verbal reports were made, again no printed report was tabled. External speakers

were from the Gay and Lesbian Foundation and the NHS Central Manchester Health Trust. Gender identity was also mentioned as a future issue. (RJV note: there seemed to be an assumption that authorities/organisations have a right to enquire about sexual orientation – surely this is up to individuals to decide what information about themselves they need to provide?).

### 3. Budget Saving Options.

This item occupied most of the meeting. The tabled report was, in my opinion, of a much better standard than that at the ESC, with information on the number of 'interventions' and services provided in some areas as well as financial figures. The community/voluntary organisations were represented by Mike Wilde and Beth Plant from MACC (Manchester Community Central). MACC had organised a meeting of these organisations recently to discover their views on proposed options for Council grant cuts. The MACC reps pointed out that many of these organisations are already in a poor financial position and some are depleting reserves to stay afloat, and that Manchester is one of the most unequal cities in the UK. They mentioned possible use of the Airport dividend to support the work of their organisations, and a reduction in the salaries of MCC Executives. Cllr Flanagan jumped on the latter suggestion, pointing out that to do so would result in the Council being sued for constructive dismissal. Cllr Murphy noted that some senior managers had been and will be made redundant as a result of past and forthcoming cuts.

There was some discussion on Advice Services currently funded by the Council. In response to a suggestion, Cllr Flanagan said that although Manchester has about £240 million of reserves, most of this is allocated to specific functions and so cannot be transferred to a general revenue pot to fund grants. There was concern that any of the options on advice services would lead to effectively the complete loss of such services in Manchester. Cllr Andrews (rightly) pointed out that the issue with respect to cut options is all about choices (as per national government resource allocation decisions).

Perhaps the most emotive issue of the overall budget discussions was the provision of help for cases of domestic abuse, with participants very concerned about the impacts of any cuts in this area of services. It was noted that the closure of womens' refuges in other areas had increased the workload of Manchester based services.

Overall, the Chair had a hard time keeping discussions to the point (but did well in my opinion). She also made the point that the Committee members could do with more information with respect to cut options in some areas. She summed up by noting:

- the Committee sees beyond the cash i.e. what cuts will bring in terms of service reduction;
- people are encouraged to participate in the Council's participation exercise;
- there will be additional meetings between Councillors and community/voluntary bodies;
- the Committee is not happy with either option on advice services;
- information on impacts of cuts options will be collated for further consideration.

Regards,

Dick Venes,  
Hon Secretary, Manchester Green Party.

20<sup>th</sup> December 2014.