

Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Committee 27th of October, 2015

Before the meeting proper started the chair (Cllr Gillard) advertised to members the new interest group on the environment set up by Executive Member for the Environment Cllr Chappell.

The first item on the agenda was a **report into the City's libraries**. The report was introduced briefly before the following questions were asked by councillors:

- A. Cllr Igbon highlighted problems between staff and customers at the new Hulme High Street Library then asked if artwork would be added to the library.
- B. Cllr Trotman asked how many people use the computers in libraries to contact the council.
- C. Cllr Sheikh asked what the former library in his ward will be used for.
- D. Cllr Cookson outlined work being done on ensuring that Levenshulme Library is used in the future. There was a specific question on the future of the space once the school currently using the library ceases this in February.
- E. Cllr Paul made a statement about the report's use of charts.
- F. Cllr Austin welcomed the clear style of the report. (MS: I agree this report was definitely a lot better written than is standard. However, there are still a number of factual errors which the councillors missed, such as the fact that the report states that the Afro-Caribbean collection has moved to the new Hulme High Street Library – if it has, I can't see it.) He went on to ask how the membership of Burnage Library had changed since it had become a 'community library' (MS: code for 'massively reduced service').
- G. Cllr Shone asked what the relationship between 'community libraries' and Council-maintained libraries. (MS: Cllr Shone sort clarification when she received a vague response – something that is rare amongst councillors).
- H. Cllr Longsdon asked how the Treasures on Tour programme (which takes the Library archives to local libraries) is publicised.
- I. Cllr Watson asked if the work between libraries and public health would continue. Cllr Watson also asked which of the six libraries are being refurbished. She also asked how volunteers were managed at Central Library
- J. Cllr Knowles asked a question about library usage figures.
- K. Cllr Igbon said that she was worried that users were not being correctly measured at Hulme Library and suggested the introduction of a swipe card.
- L. Cllr Paul asked about increasing cycle parking at Central Library.
- M. Cllr Watson pointed out that the figures indicating net financial benefits from the service were substantial.
- N. Cllr Kirkpatrick asked whether the mobile library service was still operational.

The answers were as follows:

- A. Director of Libraries Neil MacInnes said that many of the problems were caused by a lack of 'customer education' on how to use libraries, but that the problem was getting better. (MS: The whole exchange shifts all of the blame onto the customers rather than accepting that a space that is both a Leisure Centre and a Library and has staff that only work at one of those parts is inherently confusing.) He went onto to say that the issue of artwork would be looked at. (MS: Action doesn't seem that likely.)

- B. Neil MacInnes said that there had been a real push on digital. He also said that there was now WiFi in every library (MS: news to me).
- C. Executive Member for Culture Cllr Battle replied that community groups will have a right to bid and that no one wants to see the library building become boarded up.
- D. Cllr Battle said that some of the issues raised about Levenshulme Library would be picked up outside of the meeting.
- E. Mr MacInnes said he took on board the point about charts.
- F. Neil said that he would be able to get the Burnage Library figures for Cllr Austin.
- G. Mr MacInnes replied by saying that the relationship between Wythenshawe and Northernden library would be extended now that the service at Northernden had been stabilised.
- H. Neil said that the Treasures on Tour programme showed the material to individual groups rather than the public and so publicity was via direct contact.
- I. Mr MacInnes outlined the general work done by volunteers and said that more would be done to increase volunteer participation across the service. He listed the libraries which are to be refurbished (Withington, Gorton, Longsight, Harpurhey and I was too slow in writing down the final two). He said that the role of libraries in health was important.
- J. Mr MacInnes pointed out that Cllr Knowles had misunderstood the figures.
- K. Cllr Battle said she was against the introduction of barriers to usage. Mr MacInnes said that measuring was hard to do at that site but ways of recording visits to the library were being looked into.
- L. Mr MacInnes pointed out that cycle parking was not covered by his brief.
- M. Neil agreed about the financial benefits from the service.
- N. Mr MacInnes confirmed that there was still a mobile library service and that the publicity around this service would be looked into.

The meeting then moved to item 6, **Homelessness**.

The item was introduced by officers including Jenny Osborne, Strategic Lead for Adult Public Health. The report was outlined and general figures about rough sleeping were given. (MS: there was no citation in the report or at the meeting indicating how these figures have been collected.) The officers again quoted from the report by saying that more beds had been added to the service. The overview also highlighted the Council's new campaign to encourage people to give to a central fund rather than to beggars. (MS: what was new was that the officer said that "we would use the money to help people" – I previously understood the fund to be associated with charities rather than the Council. If what she said was accurate, the plan is even worse than I had thought.)

Cllr Andrews, the executive member responsible for this area, thanked the Homelessness Task and Finish Group for their work. He also said that the report was the best he had seen in 30 years. (MS: he asked that this be reported by anyone taking notes, and it is my pleasure to do so.)

The Chair, Cllr Gillard, said that the topic was close to his heart.

Cllr Shone thanked officers for the report and proceeded to voice her frustrations around the current levels of homelessness. She said she was “not keen on the report”. She asked where the quantitative data was on the topic. Cllr Shone characterised the position as shameful and said that it made her cringe. She said that the problem was “out of control”. She went on to say that the homeless people are not the problem. She then asked why the head count was so low and inaccurate. (MS: it was nice for once to hear a councillor criticise the council’s response and voice their concerns.)

The Chair said he felt Cllr Shone’s frustrations but said that we should support the officers who had stepped up and done a good job. (MS: Mr Gillard is usually one of the better councillors, but here he has fallen into the current Manchester Labour Councillor mindset of equating any criticism of officers as being in and of itself bad. This meeting is called a scrutiny committee for a reason.)

Councillors Watson and Gillard then both blamed the problem on the government. Cllr Andrews responded to Cllr Shone by saying that no-one was more aware of the issue than himself. He said that he had never seen it as bad in his life. He then said that homeless people gravitate to Manchester because the authority deals with it better than other places. He then repeated the Council’s assertions that: a lot of the homeless are not residents, the media is being unreasonable and that many of the people aren’t homeless. He went on to say that homeless people should accept help from officers. (MS: Again, Mr Andrews relied on hearsay for his evidence. On the point of accepting help from officers, why isn’t Mr Andrews interested in why help is refused?)

The Chair said he “couldn’t agree more” with Mr Andrews. (MS: well scrutinised.) The officer went on to answer Cllr Shone’s question about the head count by explaining that it was a statutory count and so had to be done in a prescribed manner. The officer went on to repeat the point that some homeless people refuse help and noted that officers had re-housed 1,700 people last year. She said that protestors were making work much harder. (MS: it is right that the officer points out that the service is doing their best in difficult circumstances. However, again, why isn’t the refusal of help being looked into?)

The Chair again backed up the officers. After a break in normal proceedings sparked by Cllr Shone’s comments, normal service was resumed with the following questions:

- A. Cllr Watson asked about the increase in non-City Centre rough sleepers and people sleeping in campervans. She was interrupted by Cllr Longsden shouting that they are gypsies.
- B. Cllr Longsden said that most of the people in campervans are travellers and that he had experienced the problem in his ward for years. He said that he had often tried to get rid of them. (MS: Councils have a statutory duty to provide pitches for travellers, glad to see Cllr Longsden is on board with this.) His question was about the supervision of temporary accommodation.
- C. Cllr Reid asked about the provision of services for young people. She noted that ‘sofa surfing’ accounts for a substantial amount of homelessness but that this phenomenon was under-recorded.
- D. Cllr Austin asked for a breakdown of providers. He then raised the issue of the hotel being developed by ex-Manchester United footballers which is currently being used by a number of individuals.

- E. Cllr Paul asked about how many of the homeless were ex-service personnel. He also made statements about educating people into adopting the Council's view of the problem (MS: I'm paraphrasing here).
- F. Cllr Igbon asked what was being done to help support people who are at risk of becoming homeless. After having had her questions answered the councillor left at 15:25.
- G. Cllr Curley made a long series of statements covering: how well Manchester did in providing care to vulnerable people (MS: does that include child services, which was recently rated as being inadequate by Ofsted?); the extent to which ex-service personnel are 'hooked on drugs'; the extent to which rough sleepers have learning disabilities; the legal position regarding the ex-footballers owned hotel; and the development of more houses for ex-service personnel. He later added his view that the most vulnerable people should be prioritised.
- H. Cllr Shaukat Ali asked how food distribution was coordinated.
- I. Cllr Sheikh said that one of the reasons why people refuse help is that they have pets. He went onto ask how this was being handled. (MS: well done to Cllr Sheikh, thank you for being the only person present who suggested that there might be reasons why help is refused.)
- J. Cllr Rawson asked what was being done to look into the reasons why people are homeless and whether the benefit sanctions played a role. She also asked about how officers worked with GMP on street begging.

Answers were as follows:

- A. The officer said that there were plans to do a cross-city count to assess rough sleeping outside of the city centre (MS: good, wonder how it will be done). She said that she was aware of a group of rough sleepers in Chorlton and that they had refused help.
- B. In short, the officer said that temporary accommodation would be supervised. This was reiterated by Cllr Rowles, who handles this brief as a junior executive member.
- C. Officers said that they worked with Barnardos to help care-leavers.
- D. Cllr Andrews used this as an opportunity to further vent his frustrations at the ex-footballers and at the 'professional protestors'. He made unsubstantiated suggestions that legal highs were being used at the site. (MS: I can understand elements of Cllr Andrews frustrations but I feel that the council shouldn't be in the business of making accusations without producing evidence.) Officers said they were trying to help people in the building.
- E. Cllr Rowles said that she wanted it to be noted that just because people might not be homeless does not mean they are then ignored. (MS: well done Councillor Rowles for at least saying this as no-one else had done. However, that should be balanced against how often and the hostility with which the councillor labels people as not homeless.) She went onto say that a space for use in the evening was being developed.
- F. The cutting of advice services was agreed to be a problem. The number of people said to be rough sleepers due to evictions alone was said to be relatively low.
- G. Officers and Cllr Rowles made a number of comments about the statutory duty of local authorities to residents and said that these issues were being addressed. Cllr

Rowles said that it wasn't just vulnerable groups who were affected by homelessness.

- H. Officer Hazel said that giving food to people on the street simply enables people to stay there. She again said that an indoor offer where food would be provided was being developed. She said that you can't help people until they are off the street (MS: while this is in part true, the tone again displayed (to me at least) a lack of concern as to why homeless people are reluctant to work with the council).
- I. It was said by Hazel that more providers were now accepting pets (MS: would be nice to have some clearer data, but at least that's a start).
- J. Work with GMP on street begging was said to be ongoing.

There was then a brief discussion between councillors Rawson, Austin and Andrews about whether or not the issue would be presented before full council.

Chair Gillard rounded up the issue by praising officers and said that the work done on this area shows that "great things can happen". In response to something that caught his eye (MS: possibly me shaking my head in incredulity), he added whether or not other people agree.

The meeting then went onto discuss the **Manchester International Festival**. After the extensive write-ups of the other topics, I'll keep this brief. The Council heard from people connected to the festival. They were received very positively by all councillors. They outlined a number of achievements particularly that they had doubled the amount of £12 tickets available to Greater Manchester residents. Councillors were positive about news that the festival was looking into holding events outside of the city centre.

The possibility of including more South Asian artists, more children's events and more themes connected to Manchester were asked about, and the festival representative gave a positive response.

The importance of free events was noted by all present. Councillor Paul asked if free events could take place more outside of galleries, as some people felt these were not inviting to them.

The meeting then moved on to discuss **the committee's work programme**. There were discussions around the overly full schedule for the February meeting, potholes and minor funding issues. Councillors discussed how wards had received £30k for minor repairs but most councillors did not immediately know what that money was meant to be used for. (MS: communication issues like this do tend to cause councillors problems.)

If you have read all the way through this report well done you, sorry it's so long.

The above is an abridged impression of the meeting. For more detail please contact me at: mschreibke@hotmail.co.uk
Matt Schreibke