

Brian Candeland

This was the first scrutiny meeting I had attended for several months. First thing I noticed on entering the Town Hall was that the previous totally unfriendly 'Closed to the Public' notice at the bottom of the spiral staircase had been changed to the less unfriendly 'Closed to the Public other than those attending public meeting'; there was also a notice at the bridge across to the annexe stating that the public meeting was over there. Small steps in the process towards public engagement perhaps?

As the meeting started, I was pleased to see several other faces in the 'public gallery', other public observers perhaps; sadly no – all other people I saw there were either Town Hall employees or those required to present certain items on the agenda to the committee. I helped myself to a copy of the large bundle of agenda papers and took my seat. During the time I was there I appeared to be the only observer; I noticed that neither the Committee Chair nor anyone else acknowledged my presence – ok, I didn't draw attention to myself but I should have stuck out like a sore thumb anyway.

The previous scrutiny meetings I had been to were the Neighbourhoods committee, and I was struck by how few councillors were present here – nine including the chair (Cllr Ollerhead) - according to the agenda there should be 12. The meeting rapidly skipped over the minutes of the previous meeting to the first substantial item: 'Outcomes of the Clean City Fund'.

Clean City Fund is the £14.5m airport dividend from over 2 years ago (and the subject of great debate and lack of consultation at the time) which was put into a 'Clean and Green Initiative' named 'Green City'. A 57 page report was provided analysing how the money had been spent. There was a strong emphasis around litter and recycling, and this was the area which prompted questions from the committee (4 questions – incidentally all from female councillors). The general view was that this was a great initiative and something of which the city should be proud. Indeed looking at the report there have been a lot of projects raised, although many are still to be completed. What the report doesn't say is what other approaches and measures could have been taken with the £14.5 million. This was an interim report, there will be a final evaluation after the last project is completed (2018/9).

The next item was the 'Corporate Core Project and Business Plan' – I was at a distinct disadvantage here in not having a copy of the report – fortunately for the committee members they did have it. Councillor Flanagan (Executive member for Finance and Human Resources) advised that the current Govt cuts are leading to a loss of over a third of the workforce (£337m - £75m more than what the council think it should be). Consequently we can expect a council tax rise of 3.99%. This was a good opportunity to vent feelings at not only the Tories, but their accomplices in the previous Government, the Lib Dems.

There were numerous questions on this item and some lengthy debate. Some questions related more to the language of the report than it's content. For some of the more substantial finance questions it was acknowledged by the executive that figures were vague, and that the relevant people will come back with more precise figures. In the background lurk big 2 areas of uncertainty:

- the changes which 'Devo-Manc' will bring i.e. the powers of the elected mayor in relation to borough councils
- the further intentions of the current Government, where there was a consensus view (and one with which I sympathise) that Osborne is still figuring out what he's doing and what he can get

away with

An example of this: proposed changes to Business rate retention by local Government, where resolving the inequalities caused by moving to full localisation could well take the full term of the Parliament.

Other subjects which came up during this section:

- cutting expenditure on communication could be a mistake as we need to mitigate the impact of the cuts by encouraging behaviour change

making parking charges simpler

encouraging voter registration

i.e. quite a mixed bag, a consequence of each councillor having their own specific interests.

A sizeable amount of money which came up was £460m for the transition fund associated with the devolution of Health and Social Care; this seemed to fall into the 'vague' category.

The final part of this section was the presentation of a draft ICT (Information and Communication Technology – at an earlier point the Chair had warned people against using acronyms without explanation!). It was stated that this was overdue, but it was vital to boost this area as better IT was the key to the savings elsewhere.

Next item was Housing Revenue Account Business Plan. This was accompanied by a 100 page report; it relates to the c 16,000 houses which remain in council ownership following the large-scale stock transfer of around 15 years ago. Councillor Priest (Deputy Leader) took part at this point; he explained the lack of longer term proposals as being down to uncertainty over Tory plans (as already mentioned above) – 'we should keep our options open' i.e. the threatened welfare cap, which would have a major impact on social housing revenue, was now on hold for 12 months. The latest right-to-buy proposals had resulted in some increase in tenant purchase but not enough to be a worry – yet.

At this point, I left the meeting (at about 11.50) as I had some other tasks to do. At this point, the meeting was overrunning compared to the estimated time by about 30 minutes. I have to admire the stamina of the participants, who had also had a private meeting at 9.30 before exposing themselves to the public, and had what looked like at least an hour of further business to go.

My overall impression was of a group of worthy people genuinely wanting to do the best for their constituents feeling their way through a fog of long-winded propaganda. There is a lack of energy, and certainly a lack of joy. The fact that all scrutiny committee members belong to the same Party as the Executive cannot help; it never ceases to amaze me that local politicians and the media ignore this fact, and treat it as somehow normal. Whilst the meetings are open to the public, and indeed broadcast live, there is no culture of welcoming the public. There is also an all-pervading feeling that real decisions are made elsewhere and ordinary councillors have very little real power. The gap could not be greater between the atmosphere of this meeting and the grandiose press releases of Leese and co. regarding how wonderful Manchester is.