

Minutes of: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 26 November 2024

Present: Councillor D Vernon (in the Chair)
Councillors J Southworth, A Arif, R Bernstein, C Birchmore,
R Gold, G Marsden, E Moss, T Pilkington, D Green and
G Staples-Jones

Also in attendance: Councillor E O'Brien (Leader), Councillor S Thorpe, Councillor S Walmsley, Stuart Brown (Detective Superintendent), Neil Kissock (Director of Finance), Kate Waterhouse (Executive Director for Strategy and Transformation), Chris Woodhouse (Strategic Partnership Manager), Crispian Logue (Assistant Director of Strategy, Planning & Development), Josh Ashworth (Democratic Services)

Public Attendance: No members of the public were present at the meeting.

Apologies for Absence: Councillor N Bayley, Kirsty Oliver (Chief Superintendent)

OSC.17 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Noel Bayley with Councillor Gareth Staples-Jones substituting on his behalf

OSC.18 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

OSC.19 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

OSC.20 MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

OSC.21 MINUTES

That the minutes of the meeting held on 3rd September 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

OSC.22 BURY COMMUNITY SAFETY PARTNERSHIP STRATEGY

Councillor Walmsley Cabinet member for communities and inclusion thanked the Chair and took the report as read. She invited members to raise any exceptional issues they had. She highlighted that the annual review of the Community safety Partnership strategy for the committee and the refreshed local strategies for the year had been included in the report.

Detective Superintendent Stuart Brown from GMP Bury was introduced to the committee to be able to have discussion and answer questions.

A Councillor raised concerns about the reactive nature of crime prevention and emphasized the importance of proactive measures. She questioned how the partnership addresses the root causes of harmful behaviours and supports addiction recovery. The response highlighted that the partnership focuses on addressing root causes through various operations and outreach programs. Efforts include support for addiction recovery and engagement with community groups.

Councillor Moss inquired about the retention of new police recruits and the availability of a specialist unit for off-road bikes. The response indicated that the multi-unit is available upon request, and efforts are made to use non-conventional methods to tackle perpetrators. Retention rates are improving, and there are enough mentors for new recruits.

Councillor Birchmore asked about the coordination between the Community Safety Plan and the GMCA's crime plan. The response explained that both plans are symbiotic and aim to address regional and local priorities. Coordination ensures that resources are used effectively across the region.

Councillor Boles questioned the effectiveness of community engagement and the support for youth services. The response noted that the partnership works with youth services to engage young people and support community initiatives. Funding opportunities are available, and efforts are made to ensure that community groups are aware of and can access these funds.

Concerns were raised about the support for vulnerable children and the impact of custody on their well-being. The response emphasized that efforts are made to safeguard children and provide alternative provisions to keep them safe. The partnership works with various agencies to address the needs of vulnerable children.

A discussion took place and it was inquired about the funding for community groups and the support available for applying for grants. The response highlighted that the BCFA provides support for community groups to apply for funding. Efforts are made to ensure that smaller organizations can access funds and receive assistance with the application process.

A question was asked about the effectiveness of the Travel Safe Partnership and the coordination with British Transport Police. The response confirmed that the partnership is working well, and there is coordination with British Transport Police to address issues on the transport network.

A Councillor raised concerns about non-crime hate incidents and the police response to such incidents. The response explained that non-crime hate incidents are monitored and recorded to address potential threats. The police take a problem-solving approach to ensure community safety.

It was agreed that:

- The report be noted
- Detective Superintendent Stuart Brown be thanked for attending and providing re assurance to the committee of the works being done within the community

OSC.23 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

A report was submitted, presented by the Councillor Thorpe Cabinet member for Finance and Transformation, which had been circulated prior to the meeting.

Councillor Thorpe provided overview of the six-monthly report on the budget. The report highlighted a proposed reduction of £9.4 million, which would bring the budget gap down to £20.3 million over three years. The Council member emphasized that there was still work to be done to balance the budget by February. The report also compared the state of Bury's finances to other councils, noting that 80% of places in the UK are better funded than Bury.

Councillor Moss thanked the Council member for the report. Councillor Moss then raised two questions: Referring to page 60, paragraph 31, Councillor Moss asked about the possibility of a longer-term settlement for 2026-2027 and the introduction of the new fair funding formula (NFF). He noted that Bury seemed to be at the bottom of the funding scale and asked if the new formula might help Bury.

Cabinet member explained that it was difficult to predict with absolute accuracy what the new funding formula changes might mean for Bury. There was a perception that previous government alignments favoured certain councils politically. The new funding formula would consider factors like deprivation and the council's ability to generate income from other sources, such as council tax bandings. He expressed hope that the government would listen to Bury's concerns, but there was no certainty about the outcome.

Councillor Moss referred to paragraphs 66 and 69 on page 73, which highlighted the budget situation for 2025-2026. He noted that while the budget and reserves looked reasonably okay for now, more drastic action might be required in the future. He asked how realistic it was to make further savings.

The Council member acknowledged that while the budget might look reasonably okay, it was without any additional financial shocks. The Council was working on transforming services to be more streamlined and cost-effective. Efforts included reducing spending on areas like children's residential homes. The Council member emphasized the importance of not relying solely on a better funding formula or more money from local sources. The Council was also looking at potential income from assets like Manchester Airport and contributions to the Greater Manchester Pension Fund. The Council member stressed the need to leave no stone unturned in addressing the budget gap.

A question was asked about the management actions listed on page 67, which aimed to save £8.8 million. He inquired about the progress of these actions and whether they were on track.

The Council member explained that management actions involved savings proposals that did not negatively impact service delivery and were within the officers' remit to implement. Monthly reports tracked progress against milestones, and the Council was on track with these management actions.

There was a discussion about the impact of national insurance increases and the real living wage on the budget. Councillor Thorpe advised that the real living wage had been factored into the forecast position. The budget announcement included additional funding, but also increased costs due to national insurance. The Council was waiting

for the settlement details to understand the full impact. The Council member highlighted the potential additional costs for social care providers and suppliers, which could be significant.

The Chair summarized the discussions, noting that the Council was awaiting the settlement details and would revisit the budget in February. The Chair thanked all attendees for their participation and contributions

It was Agreed:

- The report be noted

OSC.24 CORPORATE PLAN PERFORMANCE REPORT

A report from Councillor Thorpe Cabinet Member for Finance and Transformation had been circulated prior to the meeting. The Chair invited the Cabinet member to provide a brief overview of the report.

The Council member thanked the Chair and began by noting that this was the second time presenting the document. The report aimed to align with the three strategic objectives: scaling growth, improving children's lives, and tackling inequalities. There were also enhancements around service improvement outside these strategic imperatives.

Councillor Birchmore raised a question about the application of housing support, specifically referencing the Household Support Fund (HSF) mentioned on page 18. She asked if a decision had been made on how to allocate this tranche of money.

Councillor Thorpe explained that the allocation was being considered within the property strategy work stream. Kate Waterhouse Executive Director for Strategy and Transformation added that a methodology was being developed to support the strategy, including software to profile those who might benefit from the fund. The methodology was also used to promote the uptake of pension credits and other financial support. An action plan could be brought back to the committee for a deeper dive if desired.

It was followed up by noting that some councils were using the funding to help those on the borderline of not receiving fuel payments. It was asked if Bury was making a commitment in that direction.

It was indicated that such decisions would be made within the anti-poverty strategy, which would prioritize various needs.

A concern was raised about the low percentage of staff completing Performance Development Reviews (PDRs) and the potential impact on staff turnover.

This was acknowledged the low PDR completion rate and noted that it was a priority to increase engagement and performance. Kate added that engagement metrics were measured through a core survey, which showed positive trends. The Council was not highlighting any particular risk to organizational and staffing engagement at this time.

There was a discussion around the high number of Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) in Bury compared to the national average and what could be done to bring the numbers closer to the average.

It was explained that the national average was not the most relevant comparison; instead, statistical neighbours provided a better benchmark. Bury had been an outlier for some time, and efforts were ongoing to ensure appropriate support for children with special educational needs. The Council had introduced a graduated learning approach to reduce the number of EHCPs over time. However, once a child had an EHCP, it was difficult to reduce the numbers quickly. The Council was also working to ensure that EHCP applications were appropriately assessed and supported.

This was followed up by noting that Bury might be doing more for children by granting more EHCPs and asked if Councillor Pilkington wanted to add anything as the current executive cabinet member.

The Council member emphasized that the focus was on doing the right thing for each child, rather than simply comparing numbers. Kate added that demand for EHCPs was often driven by parents' willingness to advocate for their children, which could vary by area.

A Councillor asked about tenant satisfaction and how it was measured since the housing department was brought back in-house. It was discussed that tenant satisfaction surveys were an ongoing process, not a one-time event. The housing subgroup would revisit the issue and bring it to the main committee for further discussion.

There was also discussed around the increase in the claimant count and it was asked what could be done to address this. Councillor Thorpe explained that the claimant count included people claiming benefits due to unemployment. The increase was a reflection of broader economic trends. The Council's role was to promote economic growth to address the issue.

It was Agreed:

- The report be Noted

OSC.25 LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN COMPLAINTS REPORT

A report from Jacqui Dennis Director of Law and Democratic Services presented a brief overview of the report which had been circulated prior to the meeting.

Jacqui thanked the Committee for allowing her to present the report. She noted that the report had also been considered by the Standards Committee, where Members reviewed the Ombudsman's annual letter and the Council's progress. Jacqui emphasized the importance of bringing this report to the Committee due to issues raised by the Ombudsman regarding the Council's performance.

Jacqui highlighted several key points from the report:

- **Annual Review:** The report included the Ombudsman's annual letter, which provided an overview of the complaints received and the outcomes of those complaints. The letter also highlighted areas where the Council needed to improve its performance.
- **Performance Issues:** The Ombudsman had raised concerns about the Council's handling of complaints. These concerns included delays in responding to complaints, inadequate communication with complainants, and failure to implement recommended actions.
- **Jacqui detailed the steps the Council had taken to address these issues.** This included regular meetings with the Assistant Ombudsman to discuss ongoing cases and ensure compliance with recommendations. The Council had also implemented a new policy and compliance framework to improve the handling of complaints at an early stage, reducing the likelihood of escalation to the Ombudsman.
- **Policy and Compliance Framework:** The new framework aimed to ensure that complaints were handled efficiently and effectively. This included training for staff on best practices in complaint handling, regular monitoring of complaint resolution times, and improved communication with complainants.
- **Ongoing Dialogue:** Jacqui emphasized the importance of maintaining an ongoing dialogue with the Ombudsman. Regular meetings allowed the Council to receive feedback and make necessary adjustments to its processes. This proactive approach aimed to build a positive relationship with the Ombudsman and improve overall performance.

Jacqui concluded by stating that the Council was committed to addressing the issues raised by the Ombudsman and improving its complaint handling processes. She expressed confidence that the steps taken would lead to better outcomes for complainants and a more efficient complaint resolution process.

It Was Agreed:

- The report be Noted

OSC.26 NORTHERN GATEWAY UPDATE

Councillor Eamonn O'Brien, Leader and Cabinet Member for Strategic Growth, gave a brief overview of the northern gateway report.

Councillor O'Brien emphasized that the document was comprehensive but straightforward in its objectives. The report aimed to provide detailed planning for the Northern Gateway site, which is part of the Places for Everyone (PFE) plan. The document outlined the master planning process, the phasing of development, and the policies driving the master plan.

- **Master Planning and Phasing:** The report detailed how the master planning of the site would be conducted, including the phasing of development over many years. This involved setting out the policies that would guide the master plan and the range of principles through which the plan would be determined.
- **Inclusive Growth and High-Paying Jobs:** Councillor O'Brien highlighted the importance of delivering inclusive growth and creating high-paying jobs. The goal was to ensure that local people had the skills and opportunities to access these jobs. This would involve collaboration with educational institutions, including schools, colleges, and universities, to develop a robust technical education system.
- **Transport and Travel Infrastructure:** The report emphasized the need to unlock transport and travel infrastructure to support the development. This included plans for

rapid transit bus corridors, walking and cycling pathways, and exploring the use of tram-train technology to connect the site to the wider transport network.

- **Infrastructure Requirements:** The document outlined the key areas of infrastructure that would need to be included to support the site's development. This included transport, utilities, and other essential services.
- **Policy Framework Alignment:** Councillor O'Brien explained how the Northern Gateway development aligned with broader policy frameworks, including the Greater Manchester Strategy and local strategies in Bury and Rochdale. The development aimed to attract investment from Greater Manchester, the government, and the private sector, both nationally and internationally.
- **Vision for the Site:** The report set out a detailed vision for the site, including the types of industries and jobs that could be created. Councillor O'Brien noted that the site had the potential to host a wide range of industries, from well-established sectors to emerging technologies that might not yet exist.
- **Collaboration with Partners:** The Council was actively working with the joint venture promoting the site, as well as organizations like MIDAS, to attract investment. The focus was on creating a skills strategy that was adaptable to the needs of the future economy.

Councillor O'Brien concluded by emphasizing the importance of getting the development framework right to attract investment and deliver the best outcomes for the people of Bury and Rochdale.

A member of the committee raised concerns about the types of jobs that would be created and whether specific institutions had been identified as partners.

Councillor O'Brien explained that the site would primarily be developed by the private sector, with a broad range of industries expected to be involved. The focus would be on creating high-skilled, well-paid jobs and ensuring local people had the skills to access these jobs. This would involve working with schools, colleges, and universities to develop a robust technical education system. The Council was also working with the joint venture promoting the site and organizations like MIDAS to attract investment.

Councillor Moss asked how the Council would ensure that the jobs created would benefit local people, given the site's strategic location and potential for attracting workers from a wide area.

Councillor O'Brien emphasized the importance of both skills development and transport infrastructure. The Council was working on creating good pathways for technical and academic education and ensuring that local people could physically access the site through improved transport links.

Councillor Birchmore inquired about the administrative boundaries within the Northern Gateway and how services and revenues would be managed between Bury and Rochdale.

Councillor O'Brien confirmed that the site straddles the administrative boundaries of Bury and Rochdale, and arrangements would need to be made for managing services and revenues. This could involve pooling resources and working closely with Rochdale to ensure seamless delivery.

A councillor asked about the South Heywood development and its relationship to the Northern Gateway. Councillor O'Brien clarified that the South Heywood development is part of the

Northern Gateway and includes housing allocations. The development is separate from the Simister allocation but is included in the overall Northern Gateway proposals.

There were concerns raised about the impact of the Pilsworth landfill site on the development. Councillor O'Brien acknowledged the issue and noted that efforts had been made to mitigate the landfill's impact. The landfill is currently only operational until 2028, and its future would be subject to review. The Council would work to ensure that the landfill did not pose a significant barrier to development.

A member of the committee asked about the potential impact of changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) on the Northern Gateway development. Councillor O'Brien noted that while changes to the NPPF could impact the development, the current consultation on the NPPF was not expected to undermine the Northern Gateway proposals. The Council would remain adaptable to any future changes.

A member inquired about the transport connectivity for the Northern Gateway, including the potential for a Metrolink extension. Councillor O'Brien explained that the plan included rapid transit bus corridors and good walking and cycling pathways. The Council was also exploring the use of tram-train technology to connect Bury's Metrolink system to the Northern Gateway site.

There was a discussion about the timeline for the local plan and the opportunity for member input. Councillor O'Brien stated that the local plan was in draft form and would be ready for consultation in the spring. Members would have the opportunity to provide input before the plan was finalized.

It Was Agreed:

- The Report be Noted

OSC.27 URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

COUNCILLOR D VERNON
Chair

(Note: The meeting started at 7.00 pm and ended at 9.50 pm)