

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
GMCA OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY HELD WEDNESDAY 10 DECEMBER 2025 AT
TRANSPORT FOR GREATER MANCHESTER, 2 PICCADILLY PLACE,
MANCHESTER, M1 3BG**

PRESENT:

Councillor John Walsh	Bolton Council (Chair)
Councillor Imran Rizvi	Bury Council
Councillor John Leech	Manchester City Council
Councillor Mandie Shilton Godwin	Manchester City Council
Councillor Colin McLaren	Oldham Council
Councillor Ken Rustidge	Oldham Council
Councillor Dylan Williams	Rochdale Council
Councillor Tony Davies	Salford City Council
Councillor Lewis Nelson	Salford City Council
Councillor Sangita Patel	Tameside Council
Councillor David Sweeton	Tameside Council
Councillor Jill Axford	Trafford Council
Councillor Shaun Ennis	Trafford Council
Councillor Nathan Evans	Trafford Council
Councillor Will Jones	Trafford Council
Councillor Fred Walker	Wigan Council

ALSO PRESENT:

Paul Dennett	Deputy Mayor and Portfolio Lead for Housing First
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OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Jamie Bytheway	Principal, Integrated Inclusive Employment Strategy, GMCA
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Karen Chambers	Senior Governance and Scrutiny Officer, GMCA
Joe Donohue	Strategic Lead, Homelessness and Migration, GMCA
John Hannen	Voluntary Sector North West
Matthew Hoskin	Lead Analyst (Homelessness), GMCA
Lloyd Orr	Strategic Programme Manager, GMCA
Jenny Rouse	Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprises (VCSE) Accord Implementation, GMCA
Nicola Ward	Statutory Scrutiny Officer, GMCA
Nic Witton Dowd	Assistant Director, Education Work and Skills, GMCA

O&SC 45/25

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Peter Wright (Bolton), Councillor Basil Curley (Manchester), Councillor Terry Smith (Rochdale), Councillor Helen Hibbert (Stockport), Councillor Mary Callaghan (Wigan), Councillor Joanne Marshall (Wigan).

Apologies were also received from Caroline Simpson, Group Chief Executive.

O&SC 46/25

CHAIRS ANNOUNCEMENTS AND URGENT BUSINESS

The Chair advised that for the first half of the year, the Committee had focused on key policy development, including the Greater Manchester Strategy, with limited time spent on other areas of scrutiny and added that he envisaged that the second half of the year would see further areas of scrutiny brought forward, supported by informal briefings to maximise preparation and overview for elected Members. He highlighted the importance of pre decision scrutiny and cited the previous meeting, where comments from this Committee led to significant amendments to the Local Transport Plan reported to the Combined Authority meeting.

The Chair advised the Committee that he had met with the Chair of the Audit Committee to ensure transparency and avoid duplication between audit and overview and scrutiny functions. He added that Audit Committee Members would be invited to relevant briefings, including the January budget session. It was noted that both Committees would share brief updates via email, on papers considered, for information only, to maintain linkages and clarity.

To ensure all members had the opportunity to contribute, the Chair advised that questions should be limited to one or two per agenda item, with additional questions to be taken at the end of the meeting if time permitted.

RESOLVED /-

That the Chair's announcements be noted.

O&SC 47/25

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Lewis Nelson declared a personal interest in relation to item 50/25 - Economic Inactivity Trailblazer Update.

RESOLVED /-

That Councillor Lewis Nelson declared a personal interest in relation to item 50/25 – Economic Inactivity Trailblazer Update.

O&SC 48/25

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 26 NOVEMBER 2025

RESOLVED /-

That the minutes of the GMCA Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 26 November 2025 be approved as a correct and accurate record.

Deputy Mayor, Paul Dennett, Portfolio Lead for Housing First, introduced the report which provided information on the programme for the new supply of temporary accommodation, which had been designed to improve value for money and reduce reliance on unsuitable, 'ad hoc' temporary accommodation placements in Greater Manchester (GM). The Committee were advised that the programme consisted of the following elements:

- Empty Homes and Leasing Programme: Funding to employ 17 Empty Homes officers across Greater Manchester (£911k), with a supporting £10.6m lease and repair programme bringing 400 empty homes back into use as temporary or settled accommodation.
- GM Temporary Accommodation Placement Observatory: A Housing First Unit capability (£206k), generating reliable data on TA usage, expenditure, supply and demand, providing comprehensive intelligence to inform decision making.

The Deputy Mayor advised that temporary accommodation costs were a major factor contributing to financial pressures on local authorities nationally, with some seeking support from central Government. The report aimed to complement ongoing work across GM by proposing measures such as an empty homes initiative and a property leasing scheme to tackle these challenges. The focus was on improving value for money, reducing reliance on ad hoc temporary placements, and meeting duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act.

He reported on the empty homes leasing programme, which included employing 17 officers and supporting a £10.6m leasing and repair scheme. The aim was to bring 400 empty homes back into use for temporary or settled accommodation, meeting housing duties and providing stability for residents, families, and young people.

It was highlighted that the Housing First capability investment of £206,000 to improve data and intelligence across GM. This would cover temporary accommodation usage, costs, supply, provider checks, and standards, alongside supply and demand analysis, ensuring robust oversight and informed intervention.

The Deputy Mayor reaffirmed GM's commitment to making rough sleeping rare, brief and non-recurrent. The work aimed to reduce the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for children and families, ensuring compliance with statutory limits and working towards eliminating such placements altogether. It was noted that this aligned with national Government priorities set out in the Child Poverty Strategy, which also sought to end the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for children. He highlighted the importance of sustainable reductions in unsuitable temporary accommodation and continuing initiatives such as 'A Bed Every Night' as part of GM's homelessness strategy.

As of March 2025, 5,915 households, including 8,651 children, were living in temporary accommodation in GM. This was described as a significant concern requiring urgent action. The Deputy Mayor outlined key challenges, including rising demand, longer stays due to move-on difficulties, and a lack of truly affordable housing. The importance of lobbying Government on subsidy rules and addressing financial pressures was noted. While leasing was acknowledged as a short-term measure, the long-term aim remained increasing public ownership. The Deputy Mayor commended the collaborative work with local authorities and stressed the need for continued efforts to reduce reliance on ad hoc accommodation and improve housing stability.

Officers explained that the focus on empty homes was for two main reasons: firstly, to build on existing successful work in Wigan, Rochdale and Manchester to bring properties back into use and strengthen local housing markets; and secondly, to access properties currently off the wider market without impacting long-term housing supply. This approach aimed to reduce the fiscal and human costs of temporary accommodation while revitalising areas.

Members queried whether the properties targeted for the Empty Homes and Leasing Programme were located in areas of greatest need, or simply where they were available, noting the significant concentration in Manchester and its high levels of homelessness. Members sought clarification on the expected positive impacts of the programme, referencing the detailed statistics the report, and asked how the initiative would address the high costs and improve outcomes for households in temporary accommodation. The Deputy Mayor explained that property locations and programme resources were determined in close collaboration with the 10 local authorities, reflecting local needs and existing capacity. The distribution of properties and investment, as shown in the report, was intended to be balanced across GM. The Deputy Mayor noted that the programme's impact would be positive but difficult to quantify precisely due to the dynamic nature of the housing market and wider policy changes. The investment was expected to support local priorities and improve outcomes for families, children, and young people across the region.

Members suggested that, as part of the project, opportunities should be explored to improve collaboration between teams in neighbouring authorities. It was noted that many local authorities share borders, and cases of homelessness often arise near these boundaries. Members asked whether joint working could be developed to better support families who become homeless just across local borders, and whether services could be more closely aligned to take advantage of these shared challenges. The Deputy Mayor acknowledged the importance of understanding the movement of people, families, and children within GM, particularly in relation to out-of-borough placements. It was noted that current data on movement was limited, and greater collaboration between local authorities was needed to improve intelligence and address the housing and homelessness crisis. The Deputy Mayor emphasised the need for enhanced data collection and joint working, as set out in the observatory proposals, to better meet legal duties and develop effective solutions across GM.

Members raised concerns about the contribution of housing providers to the programme, citing examples of properties being sold and the resulting impact on

local residents. The Deputy Mayor acknowledged that more work was needed to improve data and transparency regarding housing providers' activities, including conversions to affordable rent, property sales, and demolitions. It was noted that the chronic undersupply of truly affordable housing was a major challenge, and that greater intelligence and collaboration with housing associations was required. The Deputy Mayor welcomed further scrutiny and transparency in this area to better inform housing strategies across GM.

Members queried the effects of the Renter's Rights Act, noting that while the legislation increased security of tenure for tenants, it may have led to some private landlords selling up, and asked how these factors were being balanced within the programme. It was noted that a full analysis of the impact of the Renters' Rights Act on property sales had not yet been completed. While Government data showed an increase in Section 21 evictions and rents rising above inflation in GM, further work was required to disentangle the reasons behind property sales and evictions.

Officers agreed to undertake additional analysis and bring together data from various sources to address this issue.

Members welcomed the opportunity to undertake retrofit work, noting its importance in improving the quality and energy efficiency of homes and reducing bills for residents and emphasised the need for an effective system to deliver retrofitting quickly across all tenures. The Deputy Mayor noted that retrofitting homes remained a major challenge in GM, hindered by limited funding and workforce capacity. It was highlighted that clarity was needed on energy efficiency standards and strategic deployment of resources, including investment in skills and local supply chains. The Deputy Mayor emphasised the importance of realistic planning and continued work to support innovation and improvement in housing quality across the region.

Members raised concerns about the impact of housing instability on children, particularly disruption to schooling and friendships and asked how national collaboration was being managed, highlighting the need to balance improvements locally with the potential for increased demand from people moving into the area.

The Deputy Mayor reported that he had commissioned research in Salford, in collaboration with the University of Salford and children's services, to examine the experiences of children in temporary accommodation. It was noted that the findings would be made publicly available once completed. The Deputy Mayor expressed deep concern about the impact of temporary accommodation on children and young people, including effects on development, education, socialisation, and life chances, and emphasised the need for further work in this area.

The Chair noted that due to time constraints and a lengthy agenda, further contributions could not be taken during the meeting. Members were invited to submit their questions by email to officers, with responses to be circulated to all committee members. The Chair apologised for the limitation and confirmed that officers would be pleased to respond to questions outside the meeting.

RESOLVED /-

1. That the GM Overview and Scrutiny Committee support the allocation of £11.7 million to employ Empty Homes Officers and deliver a lease and repair programme, bringing 400 empty homes back into use as temporary or settled accommodation across Greater Manchester.
2. That the GM Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorse the continued development of the GM Temporary Accommodation Placement Observatory to provide reliable intelligence on temporary accommodation usage, expenditure, and supply, enabling evidence-based policy and targeted interventions.
3. That the GM Overview and Scrutiny Committee advocate for embedding homelessness prevention strategies within local services and neighbourhoods, and encourage collaboration with housing providers, NHS GM, and other stakeholders to address the root causes of homelessness and improve outcomes for vulnerable residents.

4. That the comments of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee be noted.
5. Officers to analyse the impact of the Renters' Rights Act on property sales and evictions, and report findings to the committee.
6. Members to submit further questions by email to officers; responses will be circulated to all committee members.

O&SC 50/25

ECONOMIC INACTIVITY TRAILBLAZER UPDATE

Nic Witton Dowd, Assistant Director, Education Work and Skills and colleagues attended the meeting to provide the Committee with an overview of the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer. She advised that Greater Manchester (GM) was selected to be one of eight Economic Inactivity Trailblazer (EIT) areas as outlined in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Get Britain Working White Paper required to test and learn new approaches to tackling economic inactivity. She added that responding to economic inactivity was a key part of our ambitions for Live Well and was one of the major focuses of work for the Prevention Demonstrator and stated that the underlying causes of and challenges around economic inactivity were fully interrelated with other areas, such as physical health, mental health, skills, housing, safety, family relationships and so on, all of which were priorities for Live Well and crossed over with other key cohorts for the Prevention Demonstrator. She advised that this report would examine the EIT and highlight the activity to date, setting out the ambition over the coming months and demonstrating how GM would move beyond the trailblazer as a standalone programme towards its potential role, impact and delivery for the Prevention Demonstrator, Live Well, the wider skills and employment system and most importantly GM's residents.

Officers provided an update on the EIT programme, noting it had acted as a catalyst for change across GM. The programme, initially funded for one year and now extended, enabled local authorities to test new approaches and fill gaps in employment and skills support. Officers reported that nearly 40 interventions were

underway across all ten localities, supporting priority cohorts and engaging 898 residents to date, with an ambition to reach 4,500. The programme focused on direct support for residents, system change through the Live Well model, and collaboration with partners including the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise sector (VCFSE), DWP, and Jobcentre Plus (JCP). Officers highlighted the importance of data sharing, digital transformation, and embedding resident voice in service design. Case studies, such as Oldham's community-led approach, demonstrated the impact of joined-up support. The programme was expected to inform future commissioning models and contribute to GM's strategic employment and skills blueprint.

Members highlighted two key areas of concern, young people and those not in education, and people over 50 who had become increasingly economically inactive since Covid. Members noted recent government announcements regarding approaches to these issues and queried how these would be implemented, recognising that economic inactivity could arise through no fault of the individual or due to barriers to employment. Officers explained that several test and learn projects within the programme were focused on young people and the over 50s, reflecting the largest age groups affected by economic inactivity. It was noted that the initiative was designed to complement other employment support programmes across GM, acting as a means to join up and fill gaps in provision. Officers highlighted that local authorities defined their own approaches based on identified local needs and gaps in existing support.

Members advised that they were uncomfortable with the term 'economic inactivity'. Officers noted that the term 'economic inactivity' was unpopular, particularly among disabled people, and that work was underway with the GM Disabled People's Panel to consider alternative language. Officers explained that, for this programme, the definition used was that of the DWP, which referred specifically to people claiming benefits who are not required to look for work due to health conditions or other barriers. It was emphasised that the technical definition did not mean individuals did not wish to work. Officers confirmed that, alongside Government requirements, work was ongoing to explore more appropriate terminology for future use.

Members enquired about the measures being taken to ensure employer engagement with the programme. Officers emphasised that employer involvement was essential to achieving GM's employment rate target of 80%. It was noted that teams across the local authorities were actively working to engage employers, and that further exploration and investment in this area was planned for the second year of the programme. Officers highlighted the importance of employer engagement from the VCFSE sector, particularly employers rooted in the community. It was noted that Stockport's approach built on an existing partnerships between social enterprises and employers and aimed to engage the wider community sector. Officers emphasised that moving from unemployment to employment involved overcoming multiple hurdles, including the need for employers to provide accessible work. Projects were recognised for their holistic approach, such as Oldham's case study in the presentation on making employment accessible for individuals with special educational needs. It was noted that there were several organisations that were addressing barriers to employment and considering the individual circumstances of job seekers.

Members asked if English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) funding was contained within the programme. Officers confirmed that ESOL funding continued through the adult skills fund and other sources, including significant investment from JCP and voluntary organisations. It was noted that the demand for ESOL provision remained high.

Members noted the headline cost of £10m for the programme and suggested it would be valuable to extrapolate the potential savings, which could be significantly higher if individuals moved from unemployment into work. Members highlighted the wider benefits, including improvements in mental health, increased tax contributions, and overall wellbeing, and asked whether any analysis had been undertaken to assess these potential long-term savings, as such evidence could demonstrate the true value of the programme. Officers noted that evaluating potential savings from the programme was part of ongoing internal cost-benefit analysis and wider evaluation work. While no definitive answer was available yet,

officers agreed to review the impact of the £10m investment specifically at the end of the programme, once data on the number of people supported and their employment outcomes was available.

Members emphasised the importance of a whole-person approach to supporting those furthest from employment. They noted the technical challenges in scrutinising the programme due to the variety of projects and the metrics provided, which were not clearly linked to individual initiatives. Members suggested that the programme would benefit from a deeper scrutiny session or briefing to better understand the data and outcomes. Officers acknowledged that it was difficult to assess the effectiveness of individual projects due to the programme's test-and-learn approach and the fact that it had not yet completed a full year. Unlike a standard programme with set profiles and monthly metrics, this initiative was designed to experiment and identify what worked and what did not, which was equally valuable. Officers explained that less emphasis had been placed on tracking progress against fixed targets during this initial year, focusing instead on learning and adapting as the programme developed.

Members expressed a wish to see demographic data, particularly with women separated as a category, noting that women's working experiences and challenges differed significantly from men's throughout their lives. Members emphasised the need for greater focus on these differences and raised concerns that the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) may disproportionately impact women's jobs, especially in administrative functions. Officers agreed that reporting on the impact for women was important and confirmed that the reporting system could be adapted to provide more detailed analysis based on available data. Officers noted that, due to the test-and-learn nature and compressed delivery window of the programme this year, evaluation had focused more on qualitative impacts. They indicated that future evaluations would allow for deeper analysis of metrics, including value for money and the specific impact on women.

Members asked about the plan for system change, how learning would be captured and shared across districts, the GMCA and employers, and sought reassurance on

JCP integration within the Live Well model. Officers reported that planning for system change and learning was taking place at multiple levels, involving project teams across all boroughs. Officers noted that ongoing collaboration was helping to embed the Live Well journey to employment, which was developed with local authorities and partners. The process was described as continuous and evolving, with learning being gathered from various initiatives and funding streams, such as the Work Well project and the Prevention Demonstrator. Officers emphasised that evaluation work was underway to provide an overview of the impact and to inform a whole-system approach to supporting residents, recognising that this work formed part of a wider programme across the GMCA and its partners.

Members expressed concerns that JCP culture had been reported by some clients as not person-centred and requested clarity on the practical arrangements for integration with a Live Well model, staff development, and safeguards. Officers reported that JCP integration was being progressed through the secondment of a JCP staff member into the GMCA to build practical links and collaboration. It was clarified that the aim was not to turn JCP offices into Live Well centres or to transfer DWP staff to GM, but to work together to provide a holistic offer for residents. Officers highlighted examples of existing integration, such as co-location in community settings like the Bolton Hub, and emphasised the importance of cultural change. It was noted that many JCP staff were committed to supporting residents and wanted to be part of their communities. Officers acknowledged national efforts to reshape the JCP experience and confirmed that ongoing work aimed to ensure JCP was a valued partner within the GM system, supporting the region's employment and skills strategy through greater collaboration.

Members welcomed the programme, particularly initiatives such as job clubs and social prescribing, noting their positive impact in Trafford. Members raised questions about mental health support for young people and asked what further measures could be taken to address emotional-based non-attendance, which was contributing to higher rates of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) in the city region later in life. Officers noted that mental health support for young people was included as a focus within some programmes and acknowledged that

additional work was being undertaken elsewhere. Officers advised that, as they did not lead on young people's services, they would refer the question to relevant colleagues and provide a fuller response in due course.

Members raised a question regarding individuals with disabilities and those with long-term chronic health conditions and the importance of supporting these individuals to move from long-term sickness into employment and to provide them with opportunities. They queried how employers who were reluctant to offer flexible working arrangements were being engaged, and what adjustments were being implemented to address these issues and highlighted the need for employers and businesses to adopt practices that supported the health and inclusion of people with disabilities and chronic health conditions. Officers reported that significant activity had taken place in this policy space relating to work and health over the past year, following the Government's launch of the Get Britain Working White Paper in November 2024. Officers noted that this included work on pathways to work and benefits consultation, as well as measures to enhance support through Jobcentre services. It was highlighted that while changes to the benefits system often received the most attention, the White Paper also introduced the Keep Britain Working programme, led by Sir Charlie Mayfield, which reviewed best practice among employers in supporting workplace health and helping employees remain in work. Officers advised that GMCA had committed to becoming a vanguard within this ten-year programme, aimed at engaging employers to take an active role in workplace health and recognise their responsibility to support employees to stay in work. The initiative would build on existing work such as the Good Employment Charter and Disability Confident schemes. Officers emphasised the importance of bringing employers along on the journey, reflecting feedback from residents and programme participants, and expressed optimism about the potential for positive change.

Members raised concerns regarding the increased pressure on VCFSE organisations, noting that some were funded through ad hoc grants, which created significant insecurity for smaller community organisations. They questioned how this issue would be addressed in the long term and whether the funding was intended only for short-term projects or if further funding would be available. It was

highlighted that longer-term funding would enable these organisations to plan effectively to tackle the issues identified. Officers noted that while small grants were an important part of the system and provided opportunities for organisations to engage, they often represented only an initial step. They added that small grants could act as a catalyst but stressed the need for an integrated settlement and framework to build stability and support emerging organisations. It was noted that approximately 75% of small and medium-sized voluntary organisations operated within networks rather than independently, and that local infrastructure organisations funded by local authorities played a key role in supporting growth. Officers reported positive discussions with colleagues on creating a framework that not only avoids extracting capacity from the sector but also lays stepping stones for organisations to scale up and become sustainable employers. The test would be whether the system developed after the trailblazer programme fosters capacity growth at the centre rather than simply extracting value.

Members noted personal experience of a voluntary group supporting individuals along the route towards employment, with people with learning difficulties, those returning to work, and transplant patients among the volunteers. They highlighted that the programme also involved school pupils undertaking work experience as part of their progression towards employment. It was emphasised that the programme should be considered in different ways and should look beyond immediate outcomes to future opportunities. They recognised that the initiative addressed not only employment but also wider social issues, including mental health, inclusion, and tackling isolation. Members stated that this was an initial step and that a follow-up programme would be necessary to build on the experience and skills gained by volunteers, ensuring these were not lost to the system. Officers explained that additional programmes were available for individuals needing more structured and intensive support beyond the initial interventions and emphasised the importance of a ‘no wrong front door’ approach to ensure people receive appropriate support at any stage of their journey, including signposting to further employment and skills pathways once confidence has been built and barriers removed.

Officers advised that the next step was to determine the funding and future direction of the programme. They reported that engagement with partners was ongoing to shape plans for the coming year. It was noted that most projects had not been running long enough to assess success, and therefore it would not be appropriate to make definitive decisions at this stage. Officers emphasised the need for a flexible approach as the next financial year begins, inviting partners to outline the types of activities they wished to pursue and the target groups they aimed to support. Officers confirmed that they would facilitate and support any adjustments to the trailblazer programme over the next year, ensuring that projects remained collaborative and adaptable to progress both individual outcomes and project objectives.

Members observed that the team faced a challenging task given the numerous possible approaches. They emphasised the importance of focusing on routes that were proving effective across GM, rather than attempting to address every issue. Members acknowledged that priorities varied and all concerns were valid but warned against dispersing efforts across too many areas. It was suggested that the most successful approaches were likely to come through local authorities, given their proximity to the issues. Members recognised that not all areas could be covered and accepted that this may lead to some dissatisfaction but stressed the need to concentrate on what works and delivers results. Officers acknowledged the observation and noted that the funding stream provided a unique opportunity to test a wide range of approaches. They emphasised the importance of identifying not only what works but for whom it works and using that learning to inform future decisions. They confirmed that as the programme moved into the next financial year, successful initiatives would be continued and scaled up, while those that did not deliver would be discontinued. Officers stressed the need for conscious decisions to stop ineffective activity and highlighted that the trailblazer should be seen as a catalyst for change rather than a standalone project. The aim was to reshape employment support across GM to achieve the greatest impact for residents and communities.

The Chair recommended that, in addition to the two existing recommendations, a further deep dive and additional reporting be undertaken on the successes of the various projects within the programme. The Chair acknowledged that there may also be failures and emphasised the importance of examining both successes and failures. He requested that a cost-benefit analysis of the projects be included. It was suggested that such analysis would be extremely beneficial across the programme.

RESOLVED /-

1. That the GM Overview and Scrutiny Committee recognise the achievements to date of all partners happening as a result of the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer
2. That the GM Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorse the integration of the Live Well Journey to Employment across all localities.
3. Officers to review and report on the impact of the £10m investment at the end of the programme, including analysis of potential long-term savings and wider benefits once employment outcome data is available.
4. Officers to arrange a dedicated scrutiny session or briefing to provide Members with a deeper understanding of programme data, outcomes, and learning from the test-and-learn approach.
5. Officers to refer the query on mental health support for young people and measures to address emotional-based non-attendance to the relevant colleagues and provide a fuller response to Members.

O&SC 51/25

GREATER MANCHESTER VCFSE ACCORD

Jenny Rouse, VCFSE Accord Principal Officer, attended the meeting to provide the Overview and Scrutiny Committee the opportunity to review an early draft of the updated Greater Manchester VCFSE Accord ahead of formal sign-off processes.

Members were informed that the Accord builds on decades of partnership working. The previous agreement was in place from 2021 to 2026. It was noted that the new Accord would run from 2026 to 2035, aligning with key regional strategies. The Accord aimed to strengthen trust, accountability, and joint working, with a focus on removing barriers such as short-term funding and differing processes. Engagement with around 750 stakeholders had shaped the draft, and Members were invited to provide early feedback before final sign-off.

Members welcomed the draft Accord, noting its focus on local voices and volunteers. Members commented that local volunteers played a vital role in understanding community needs and highlighted the importance of ensuring their feedback was incorporated into wider projects and asked for further explanation on how grassroots groups and individuals could engage with and contribute to the Accord's development and implementation, particularly where there may be limited contact with formal networks or local infrastructure organisations. Officers emphasised the importance of ensuring that smaller organisations were aware of the Accord, recognising that much of the work takes place at that level. Officers acknowledged the significant progress made in GM, while noting that further work remained. It was hoped that the updated Accord included sufficient mechanisms to address ongoing challenges and that it would be relevant to all 17,500 organisations in the sector. Officers explained that, in practice, it would not be possible to engage directly with every organisation, and therefore infrastructure bodies and leadership structures were essential to represent the sector and the wider community. Officers highlighted that the draft Accord included expectations around socialising the Accord and holding partners to account, so that all organisations could benefit from its provisions. Officers noted that feedback from the previous Accord indicated varying levels of awareness and use and stressed the importance of embedding the Accord more widely. Officers also commented that, while some parts of the public sector had engaged more fully with the Accord, it remained important to ensure its relevance and impact across all partners.

Members noted that the faith sector and social enterprise sector had been underrepresented in discussions to date and welcomed further engagement or clarification on how these sectors had been involved in the development of the Accord. They expressed concern that conversations often focussed predominantly on the voluntary sector, even when referring to the broader VCFSE sector, and suggested this may reflect the prevailing culture. Members also queried how the Accord was used in practice, noting that while infrastructure organisations may use it to navigate tensions with local authorities, it was unclear how effective the Accord had been for smaller voluntary groups, faith sector organisations, and places of worship, as the impact in these areas had not been widely observed. Officers acknowledged the evolution of the VCFSE acronym, noting that 'faith' was added to better reflect the sector's diversity. Officers explained that, after identifying gaps in engagement, particularly with faith and disability-led organisations, additional outreach was undertaken to ensure their voices were included in the Accord. Officers noted that awareness and use of the previous Accord varied locally, and that the updated Accord would place greater emphasis on promotion, socialisation, and sharing best practice across GM.

Members, drawing on personal experience in the voluntary sector, welcomed the Accord's focus on putting people and communities first. They highlighted the need for robust systems to ensure that individuals did not speak on behalf of others without appropriate moderation and stressed the importance of strong governance alongside leadership development. Members also cautioned that the sector had often been relied upon to reduce public costs and noted that many working in the sector faced challenging conditions. They emphasised the need to be mindful of the demands placed on voluntary sector staff and volunteers. Officers noted that the updated Accord included more specific measures to address power imbalances both between the public and VCFSE sectors and within the VCFSE sector itself. They emphasised the importance of clear representation, ensuring that those involved in governance structures advocated for their communities and that lived experience informed decision-making. Officers highlighted the need for intentional engagement with smaller organisations and for medium-sized organisations to support their involvement and stressed that promoting and socialising the Accord,

alongside robust governance, would help ensure better policy and budget decisions across GM.

Members raised questions regarding procurement, noting that small organisations often delivered excellent work within communities but faced challenges competing with larger organisations due to limited capacity and resources. They highlighted that complex and bureaucratic procurement processes could disadvantage these smaller groups and asked how support could be provided to ensure a level playing field, recognising the valuable contribution of these organisations. Officers noted that intentional steps had been taken to prioritise commissioning and grant funding for VCFSE organisations rather than profit-driven bodies. However, they acknowledged that further work was needed to ensure smaller organisations, with closer links to communities, were fully included. They highlighted the importance of understanding the barriers these groups faced and emphasised the need for codesign, capacity building, and adjustments to tender processes. Officers also stressed that safeguarding and data protection requirements must be met, particularly when working with vulnerable groups, and that ongoing efforts to address these challenges should remain a priority.

Members noted that the network within the voluntary sector had continued to strengthen over time, though further progress was still needed. They highlighted that local authorities often lacked a full understanding of how the voluntary sector operated, including its capabilities and resource requirements and identified a need for improved legal and financial advice for voluntary groups, observing that many organisations excelled at delivering services but lacked access to specialist expertise. Members suggested that local authorities should consider how best to support the sector, particularly when groups take on responsibilities such as managing buildings or facilities, to ensure they had the necessary information and advice to do so confidently. Officers confirmed that the updated Accord included expectations for both the public sector and VCFSE organisations to build capacity and understanding of each other. They noted that while some local authority roles were outward-facing and regularly engage with the sector, others may have less direct contact, highlighting the need for broader awareness across all staff. Officers

acknowledged the importance of legal and financial advice, particularly in areas such as asset transfer, and recognised that not all organisations may be ready to take on such responsibilities. They emphasised the role of infrastructure bodies in supporting the sector but noted that available advice may not always meet current needs. Officers concluded that ongoing challenge and collaboration would be required to build capacity, and that public sector legal teams may not always be able to provide specialist advice to voluntary groups.

The Chair emphasised the important role of the faith sector, noting that all faiths should be robustly recognised and not overlooked, he highlighted the significant contribution made by faith groups and stressed that any lack of engagement needed to be addressed. The Chair requested that the final version of the Accord be shared with the Committee.

RESOLVED /-

1. That the GM Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the background and development process for the VCFSE Accord.
2. That the comments of the GM Overview and Scrutiny Committee are noted.
3. That the final version of the Accord be shared with the Committee for information.

O&SC 52/25

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME &
FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

Members were advised that a briefing on the budget process would be held in early January, with the date to be confirmed. Audit Committee members would also be invited to attend.

RESOLVED /-

1. That the proposed Overview & Scrutiny Work Programme be noted.

2. That Members use the Forward Plan of Key Decisions to identify any potential areas for further scrutiny.

O&SC 53/25

FUTURE MEETING DATES

RESOLVED /-

That the following dates for the rest of the municipal year be noted:

- Wednesday 28 January 2026
- Wednesday 11 February 2026
- Wednesday 25 February 2026
- Wednesday 25 March 2026