

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
GMCA OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD WEDNESDAY, 29
JANUARY 2025 AT THE TOOTAL BUILDINGS - BROADHURST HOUSE, 1ST
FLOOR, 56 OXFORD STREET, MANCHESTER, M1 6EU**

PRESENT:

Councillor Nadim Muslim	Bolton Council (Chair)
Councillor Peter Wright	Bolton Council
Councillor Russell Bernstein	Bury Council
Councillor Imran Rizvi	Bury Council
Councillor Basil Curley	Manchester City Council
Councillor John Leech	Manchester City Council
Councillor Basat Sheikh	Manchester City Council
Councillor Mandie Shilton – Godwin	Manchester City Council
Councillor Colin McLaren	Oldham Council
Councillor Terry Smith	Rochdale Council
Councillor Dylan Williams	Rochdale Council
Councillor Tony Davies	Salford City Council
Councillor Lewis Nelson	Salford City Council
Councillor Rachel Wise	Stockport Council
Councillor David Sweeton	Tameside Council
Councillor Brenda Warrington	Tameside Council
Councillor Jill Axford	Trafford Council
Councillor Ged Carter	Trafford Council
Councillor Shaun Ennis	Trafford Council
Councillor Fred Walker	Wigan Council

ALSO PRESENT:

Andy Burnham	Mayor of Greater Manchester
Councillor Nick Peel	Portfolio Lead Leader for Digital City Region

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Karen Chambers	GMCA
Gillian Duckworth	GMCA
Beena Puri	GMCA
Caroline Simpson	GMCA
Phil Swan	GMCA
Nicola Ward	GMCA
Steve Wilson	GMCA

O&SC 55/25

APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Joanne Marshall (Wigan).

The Chair welcomed new members, Councillor Brenda Warrington and Councillor David Sweeton (Tameside) to the meeting.

O&SC 56/25

CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS AND URGENT BUSINESS

Members were reminded of their obligations under the GMCA Members' Code of Conduct and were requested to complete an annual declaration of interest form, which had been emailed to them by the Governance & Scrutiny Officer.

The Chair reminded members to keep questions to a maximum of 1 or 2 per agenda item, to ensure there was time for everyone to ask a question.

The Chair raised concerns regarding the lateness of the report pertaining to item 6 on the agenda, Mayoral General Budget and Precept Proposals, as this would impact on the Committee's ability to scrutinise the report, giving them limited time to read, seek clarification and consider its content.

Officers advised that steps would be taken to ensure that any future reports were provided in a timely manner.

Members understood that there was a further budget meeting scheduled for Wednesday 5 February to discuss the total GM budget and asked officers to confirm if this discussion would include the report being discussed today and suggested it may be more productive to have a comprehensive discussion at the meeting on 5 February. Officers advised that the Mayoral budget proposals must be submitted to the Combined Authority by the end of January, ahead of the rest of the budget proposals, hence why the paper was being presented today. These proposals may be updated and presented again alongside the rest of the budget papers at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting scheduled for 5 February. The reason was that, by law, the CA must be given the opportunity to reject the mayoral proposals. If they did, they would have to propose their own budget, which would then be reviewed at the February CA meeting. Consequently, the proposals would be submitted to the CA again in updated form and included in the papers for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting taking place next week.

The Chair advised the Committee that Sacha Lord had resigned from his role as the GM Nighttime Economy Adviser following an investigation by the Arts Council. The Chair requested a report on Mayoral Advisors be brought to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on February 26th.

RESOLVED /-

1. That members as per their obligation stated in the Code of Conduct would complete their Annual Declaration of Interest form and return it to the Governance & Scrutiny Officer.
2. That a report on Mayoral Advisors be brought to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on February 26th.

O&SC 57/25

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

RESOLVED /-

No declarations were received in relation to any item on the agenda.

O&SC 58/25

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 11 DECEMBER
2024**

RESOLVED /-

That the minutes of the GMCA Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 December 2024 be approved as a correct and accurate record.

O&SC 59/25

**ADDRESSING DIGITAL INEQUITY IN GREATER
MANCHESTER**

Councillor Nick Peel, Portfolio Lead for Digital City Region introduced the report that provided the Committee with an overview of the progress towards delivery of the Greater Manchester Digital Inclusion Agenda for Change programme. He stated that his portfolio focused on empowering communities and preparing the city region for the ongoing digital and economic growth in Greater Manchester. He added that digitalisation in public services should not just be driven by austerity, but also driven by the need to improve services. As Greater Manchester continued to expand, it was important to ensure that everyone could access services and not be left behind. He stated that there was evidence that people were being excluded already, as demonstrated in the report.

Officers advised that digital inclusion was one of the priorities of the Digital Blueprint which was launched in 2023. It was noted that this was important because GM's

digital economy is growing at pace. It was stated that Greater Manchester was a world-class digital city region, with economic and social opportunities for all at the heart of these aspirations. However, these goals could not be achieved if people were digitally excluded.

Officers reported that a recent All Party Parliamentary Group on Digital Inclusion highlighted a 20% increase in GP demand and a shift towards using the NHS app. Consequently, individuals unable to access the NHS app faced increasing challenges in accessing GP services and records, illustrating how digital exclusion can limit access to essential services.

Officers reported that the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) estimated the total cost of not improving basic digital skills over the next ten years in Greater Manchester to be approximately £700M. Other statistics indicated that;

- 73% of those aged 75+ now say they had experienced one or more aspect of digital exclusion, compared to 70% in previous surveys
- 59% of disabled respondents reported experiencing at least one form of digital exclusion, compared to 56% in previous surveys
- 32% of 16–24-year-olds said they had experienced one or more aspect of digital exclusion, higher than the 27% reported in previous surveys.

Officers advised that digital exclusion impacts on all demographics and was increasingly being recognised as a national issue.

Officers also informed the Committee that digital exclusion encompasses social exclusion, where individuals were unable to stay in touch with family, and digital poverty, where residents were choosing between buying food and accessing the internet.

It was recognised that residents that attended other services, such as warm spaces, often have additional needs and therefore the Digital Inclusion Action Network was set up to lead targeted action with a specific focus on supporting under-25s, over-75s and disabled people. The Digital Inclusion Taskforce, made up of 250 members,

works collaboratively to join up activity across the region, maximise capabilities, identify need and target action to address the interrelated barriers to digital inclusion, and ensure no one was left behind.

Schemes provided to support this work further were;

- Greater Manchester Databank
- Digital inclusion pilot for social housing residents
- Care leavers digital inclusion initiative
- Doing digital in later life
- Digital Champion Volunteer Network

The Committee were invited to watch a video which provided an insight into the work completed by the Digital Wigan team when they visited Wigan Athletic Community Trust's over 55's Extra Time group.

Members asked if more funding would be made available to local authorities for device lending libraries, to enable them to do more. Officers advised that there had been no previous national funding for that service and stated that recently each of the ten local authorities had been provided with funding from the Strengthening Communities Digital Inclusion Fund. Some local authorities used this funding to provide device lending libraries whilst others used it fund other services such as training.

Officers highlighted that the Get Online GM Digital Skills and Support Finder map showcased digital skills activities, databanks, and online centres in community spaces across each local borough. This tool empowered residents, sectors, and services by connecting people to essential digital skills activities and support. It also helped identify gaps to address inequity. Officers noted the ambition for place-based support was to have it within a 15-minute walk for residents, and the Strengthening Communities Digital Inclusion Fund would help achieve this progress.

In relation to the Social Housing Pilot, members asked where the 495 residents that benefited were located, which housing associations were involved and whether this work would be taken forward. Officers advised the ambition of the project was to work with 5 housing providers to engage with 5000 people but due to a number of factors, the biggest being affordability, the numbers were nearer 500. There was a benefit impact study produced about the project by Professor Simeon Yates for the University of Liverpool which could be shared with members.

Members enquired whether it would be possible to look at a project to provide a service for immobile or older people who are unable to visit hubs. Officers advised that there were a variety of projects taking place across the city region but as the support required varied in each area it was difficult to map but it was something that could be considered with the local leads. It was noted that it was incredibly important for people to have to face to face digital support, for instance, if they were a victim of online fraud. Members asked where this support would be provided. Officers recognised that this was a real gap in support and therefore would be an area of focus going forward.

Members were interested in exploring the reasons behind digital exclusion among younger people. Officers explained that this issue was largely due to affordability and access mechanisms. For example, young people often face difficulties applying for apprenticeships on mobile phones, which presented significant barriers. Additionally, parents struggling to afford internet connectivity contributed to this problem. It was also noted that while some young people were adept at using mobile phones for communication and social media, they lacked the necessary skills to write emails, excluding them from certain skilled jobs.

Cllr Peel advised that the other aspect of digital exclusion was voluntary digital exclusion, where people choose not to access online banking perhaps due to fear of online fraud.

Cllr Peel further advised that Digital Inclusion cuts across all portfolio areas, all of which could be assisted by further progress. He stated that the new Government had

digital exclusion firmly on the agenda with a new team established at Westminster and that Greater Manchester was in a position to become a trailblazer as a national example as to how improvements can be made.

Members pointed out issues with apps like the Bee in the Loop app run by GMP, noting it was reported to be very confusing to use. They enquired about what the GMCA could do to ensure partners were part of the inclusion strategy. Officers explained that this was linked to the Live Well initiative. There was a broader expectation that when creating online services, support must be provided to help users get online. This approach was becoming more integrated and embedded within other strategies.

Members were keen to understand if there was any correlation between areas under economic pressure and the number of young people that couldn't access the materials they wanted to whether that was education or training. They asked if there were any statistics to show how digital exclusion had impacted on education and health. Officers advised that work was underway to identify the areas of deprivation to look at where our most excluded people were located, working with local authorities to identify areas with most need. Officers advised that the GMCA did not hold any statistics in relation to the impact on education and health, but NHS England had produced a paper which examined digital inequalities and health inequalities. It was hoped that data on how this links into access would become available via the Strengthening Communities Digital Inclusion Fund.

Members were encouraged by the research in France that suggested using refurbished rather than new smartphones could save up to 90% of CO2 emissions from smartphone production and enquired if local authority and GMCA devices get reused in the community. They also asked how easy it was for companies to refurbish hardware via the local authority or GMCA. Officers advised that all GMCA kit was refurbished. The scheme works by swapping old hardware for a cash value, which in turn converted into new kit which in the case of the GMCA, was given to schools. Officers advised that local authorities had access to a similar scheme. It

was noted that the scheme in Trafford provided 3500 young people with devices during the pandemic. It was recognised that this was a key asset in terms of sustainable digital inclusion.

Members expressed concerns for residents trying to bid for housing or exchanges. The system currently relies on people being able to go online. They asked what further partnerships we being explored to help people in need of housing know how to bid on properties. Officers advised that GMCA were working closely with Nick Horne, Chief Executive of Wythenshawe Housing, and other housing providers to find ways to do more in this space.

It was noted that there was a need to continue to support and invest in local community groups and volunteers to help address the needs of residents experiencing digital exclusion. Cllr Peel agreed that there were many assets in the community that could be accessed for this support which could be offered by volunteers that residents know and trust. Officers added that there was a Digital Champions programme which aimed to upskill volunteers to enable them to support residents with a digital need or question. It was reported that a similar training scheme was in place for front line workers, such as GP receptionists, to learn how to support someone with digital needs. Members noted that elderly people might also need someone to do tasks for them, rather than teach them. Officers advised that this was at the heart of the Strengthening Communities Digital Inclusion Fund and recognised that face to face interactions with people you can trust was crucial.

Members asked what difference the funding from the new Government would make. Councillor Peel advised that the current Government were putting digital inclusion at the heart of its science and tech agenda and so it did provide hope for the future that something so important was going to get a national spotlight, he added that he was optimistic that this would bring funding. He stated that digital skills were clearly a huge part of growing the economy. Officers advised that current activity was funded via retained business rates, but also by accessing funding from other areas such as the adult education budget. In addition to this, officers had highlighted with the

Government that broadband should be taxed at 5%, the same as other utilities, rather than 20% as this impacted on affordability. It was also noted that broadband should also be included with utilities when looking at benefits such as universal credit.

RESOLVED /-

1. That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the progress, risks and opportunities on Greater Manchester's Digital Inclusion Agenda for Change.
2. That the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Addressing Digital Inequity in Greater Manchester be noted.
3. That the benefit impact study produced about the social housing project by Professor Simeon Yates for the University of Liverpool be shared with members.

O&SC 60/25

MAYORAL GENERAL BUDGET AND PRECEPT PROPOSALS - 2025/26

The GM Mayor introduced the report which set out the proposals for the Mayoral General Budget and precept for 2025-26 for consideration by the members of the GMCA. The proposals being made included the budget for the GM Fire Service which had previously fallen to the GM Fire and Rescue Authority to determine.

The GM Mayor advised that the proposals were to increase the Mayoral General Precept by £16 to £128.95 per year (for a Band D property), comprising of:

- Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Services - precept of £86.20 (£5 increase);
- Other Mayoral General functions - precept of £42.75 (£11 increase).

Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Services – the GM Mayor advised that the proposed increase in the precept was required as year on year reductions in the budget had seen pump numbers go from 60plus to 48. Events such as the new years day flooding, where 1000 people were evacuated from their homes via boat by the fire and rescue service, and the fire at Bolton University in November 2019, which all pumps were in use for, reinforced the need to ensure that the cuts could not continue. The proposed increase in precept would allow GM to restore pumps to allow the service to provide the best response for the residents of Greater Manchester.

The GM Mayor advised that he was surprised by the reduction in the recent settlement from the Government, therefore he needed to look at alternative ways to maintain the Fire Plan. The proposals put forward allowed for a budget that supports the high level service without dipping into reserves.

The GM Mayor added that there does need to be a cross party conversation with Government about incidents such as the floods which were occurring more frequently and becoming more severe as there needed to be a national resource in place to assist. He added that it could not be the case going forward that flooding remains considered as a non-statutory responsibility, with local areas expected to fund all the costs of responding. He advised that he and the Deputy Mayor had begun these conversations with Government.

Other Mayoral General functions – The GM Mayor advised that the increase represents the final element of the Bus Reform business case (November 2020) which had been delivered on time and on budget across Greater Manchester with the final tranche of franchising being delivered on 5th January 2025. The increase was slightly below the original funding proposals. The existing precept of £31.75 would therefore rise to £42.75. Alongside bus reform, the precept would continue to be used to support:

- The ‘A Bed Every Night’ emergency response scheme to reduce rough sleeping in Greater Manchester and continue to support local schemes and homelessness partnerships to end rough sleeping. This scheme was

supplemented by financial support from the Greater Manchester Integrated Health and Care Partnership, Probation Service and other partners across Greater Manchester.

- The 'Our Pass' scheme, providing free bus travel within Greater Manchester for 16-18 year olds.
- Care Leavers concessionary pass providing free bus travel in Greater Manchester for young people who have been in care.

The GM Mayor advised that the proposed increase in the precept was lower than what was proposed last year as part of a 2 year phased increase of £12. He explained that this was in order to fund the bus franchising plan. It was postponed as it was not thought to be fair for all residents to pay for a new service that was not in place across the whole of Greater Manchester. However, now that the bus franchising plan had been delivered, the proposed increase could be reduced to £11.

The GM Mayor advised that it was his intention to continue the £2 capped bus fare until the end of the year. This, along with the proposals to have a London style capped daily rate by 28 March 2025, was to continue to encourage people to leave their cars at home.

The Chair thanked the GM Mayor for his introduction and reiterated the Committee's frustrations in receiving the report so late, giving them limited time to consider the report and seek clarification. The GM Mayor advised that the annual budget allocation process was challenging and that a move to a three year budget allocation would mitigate many of these issues. The Committee advised that they would welcome a maximum timeframe for any future late reports.

Members were keen to understand the use of reserves, as over the period March 24 to March 26 there had been a 23% use of reserves. They asked How realistic were the levels of reserves that would be left over, as the A bed Every Night reserves were detailed as zero by end of this year and Mayoral reserve halved between March 24 and March 26. Officers confirmed that the movement in the reserves were

all planned. The only area which was being used to fill a financial gap was the £1.4m to manage pressures on the fire budget. Officers confirmed that they were content with the level of reserves and confirmed that there were no plans to use the General Reserves in 2025/ 2026.

Concerns were raised about the National Insurance contributions increase for the Fire Service, as this was not going to be fully funded by the Government, therefore it appeared that the costs were being passed to the taxpayer. The GM Mayor advised that discussions were ongoing in relation to the recovery of the National Insurance position and what the share of the GM Fire Service would be.

Members spoke about the response times in relation to 999 and 111 calls that had improved but commented on the reduction in the number of PCSO's and asked what plans were in place to address this. The GM Mayor advised that the Chief Constable had implemented a new structure for Neighbourhood Policing which had reduced the number PCSO's in order to create a higher number of fully warranted officers. The GM Mayor stated that PCSO's had a very valued role, and they were included in each ward. He added that police numbers are almost back to 2010 levels with 2,000 extra police officers in situ. Overall crime and neighbourhood crime is down, and response times had improved.

In relation to the Bee Network, although improvements had been noted, members stated that there were still gaps in services particularly in Alkington and some areas of Salford. The GM Mayor advised that officers would explore the reasons for the service reductions in Alkington and arrange for Mayor Dennett and Salford Councillors to complete a Salford borough wide review to look at service coverage. He encouraged members to pursue reviews of any local bus services which remained inefficient.

Members requested further scrutiny on A Bed Every Night to consider the increasing demand, current provision and impact of the scheme in each GM borough as there were gaps in what was provided which needs to be constructively challenged. Given the increased need, the GM Mayor advised that the number of ABEN places

available would increase from 550 to 600 from April 2025. The Chair advised that this would be added to the Overview & Scrutiny work programme for an update in the coming months.

Members asked for clarity in relation to Other Mayoral Priorities section within the budget, and how this was made up. The GM Mayor advised that this included the Green Spaces Fund, which he was committed to keeping as although a modest amount, its impact was widespread with near to 100 schemes. Members also noted that there were a number of budgets, such as Mayors Transport, that looked to have remained static. The GM Mayor stated that this was not the full picture, transport was included in the wider budget which would be reported at the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting, but that this was an agreed contribution to specific projects.

Members commented that following the work of the recent Task and Finish Group on Integrated Water Management they were alarmed to see that flood support was not a statutory responsibility for the fire service. They added that in order to give residents reassurance, this would need to change. The GM Mayor advised that there does need to be a look back at our preparedness for these events. Caroline Simpson advised that a GM wide review into our preparedness and response was underway, adding that each local authority affected would also be completing their own review which would feed into the GM system. It was noted that it was important to understand the lessons learnt and use investment to increase our resilience. The GM Mayor suggested that the Task and Finish Group relook at the recommendations of their report to gauge progress.

Members were supportive of the Fire Service and their recent support of the flooding incidents was praised, however it was acknowledged that flood prevention data was not sufficient, members asked the GMCA if there was a way for the CA to help fund the flood gages. The GM Mayor noted the comments regarding the flood gages and advised that this would be looked at as part of the GM wide look back at our preparedness.

Members asked if GM were making modifications needed in the urban environment to ensure communities were protected and greater prepared for the climate that we have now and in the future. The GM Mayor advised that Sir John Cunliffe was completing a review into water regulation which would be launched in February in Manchester and encouraged members to get involved in order to influence the regulatory regime to ensure that residents see the benefits of the increase in their utility bills. The GM Mayor advised that multi disciplinary meetings had been arranged in areas which had seen a number of flood incidents, such as Platt Bridge, and offered a meeting in Flixton, if necessary to escalate concerns.

Members were keen to understand to what extent the capacity on public transport, particularly trams, especially at rush hour could be increased, by providing double trams. The GM Mayor advised that as patronage on the Metrolink system was increasing, he would like to see more double trams in situ, but these needed to be in the right place. He advised that he may also consider introducing a modest Tourist Levy for Greater Manchester to help the city to react more dynamically to demand.

Caroline Simpson informed the Committee that a report would be presented to the CA on Friday about Greater Manchester's ambitious 10-year Growth Plan. The report would cover investments in highways maintenance, active travel, and environmental infrastructure. She added that this integrated plan would help the GMCA understand where to direct investments and how to link them to our growth strategy. By thinking long-term and creatively, as GM does, we could effectively use public funds and leverage private investment to maximise our resources.

The GM Mayor mentioned that the plan to integrate 8 commuter lines into the Bee Network would be implemented in 3 phases. This included removing freight lines from Old Trafford and the city centre, allowing for a Metrolink-style service on the new lines which in turn would increase capacity.

Members advised that they would like to see an evident culture of efficiency, highlighting where savings and cost minimisation had been sought across the GMCA in each budget report. Members welcomed the opportunity to consider the Mayoral General Precept report alongside the other GM budget papers at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting next week.

RESOLVED /-

1. That the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Mayoral General Budget and Precept Proposals be noted and shared with the GMCA at their meeting on the 31 January 2025.
2. That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the recommendations which will be considered by the GMCA at its meeting on the 31 January 2025 as below. The GMCA is requested:
 1. To consider my proposal to increase the Mayoral General Precept by £16 to £128.95 (for a Band D property), comprising of:
 - i) Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Services - precept of £86.20 (**£5 increase**);
 - ii) Other Mayoral General functions - precept of £42.75 (**£11 increase**).
 2. To note and comment on:
 - i) the overall budget proposed for the Fire and Rescue Service,
 - ii) the use of the reserves to support the revenue and capital budgets, and the assessment by the Treasurer that the reserves as at March 2026 are adequate,
 - iii) the proposed Fire Service capital programme and proposals for funding,
 - iv) the medium-term financial position for the Fire and Rescue Service covered by the Mayoral precept
 3. To note and comment on the detailed budget proposals for other Mayoral functions;

4. To note and comment on the use of reserves as set out in Paragraph 3.3 of the report;
 5. To consider whether they would wish to submit any written comments to the Mayor in line with the legal process and timetable described in this report; and
 6. To note that at its meeting on 7 February 2025 there will be an updated budget submitted, consistent with the precept proposals, to reflect final tax base and collection fund calculations and the final baseline funding settlement.
-
3. That officers would explore the reasons for the service reductions in Alkrington and feedback to Councillor Williams.
 4. That officers would arrange for Mayor Dennett and Salford Councillors to complete a Salford borough wide review.
 5. That information regarding the review on water regulation being conducted by Sir John Cunliffe be shared with the Committee.

O&SC 61/25

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

RESOLVED /-

1. That the proposed Overview & Scrutiny Work Programme for January 2025 to March 2025 be noted.
2. That Members use the Forward Plan of Key Decisions to identify any potential areas for further scrutiny.

O&SC 62/25

FUTURE MEETING DATES

RESOLVED /-

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

- 5 February 2025 – 1pm to 3.30pm
- 26 February 2025 – 1pm to 3.30pm
- 26 March 2025 – 1pm to 3.30pm
- 9 April 2025 – 1pm to 3.30pm
- 25 June 2025 - 1pm to 3.30pm