

## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

3 September 2013

### Present:

Councillor Norman Shiel (Chair)

Councillors Bowkett, Branston, Bull, Choules, Clark, Crow, Macdonald, Morris, Mottram, Payne and Spackman

### Apologies:

Councillor Mitchell

### Also present:

Chief Executive & Growth Director, Assistant Director Environment, Housing Operations Manager, Principal Accountant, Housing Benefit Manager, Mobile Benefits Training Officer and Democratic Services Officer (Committees) (HB)

#### 40 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 May 2013 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

#### 41 **Questions from the Public under Standing Order 19**

##### Social Housing

In accordance with Standing Order No. 19, questions in respect of social housing from Mr Duley were put to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Customer Access. Copies of the questions had been previously circulated to Members. The questions and replies from the Portfolio Holder (in italics) are appended to the minutes.

##### Air Quality

In accordance with Standing Order No. 19, questions in respect of air quality from Sue Stephens of the Transition Exeter Transport Group were put.

Sue Stephens suggested that a more radical approach to reducing the reliance on the motor vehicle should be pursued. It was noted that sustainability was a key element of both the County Council's Local Transport Plan and in the determination of planning applications by the City Council as Local Planning Authority. Further to the declaration of an Air Quality Management Plan and publishing its Air Quality Action Plan, the City Council would be developing a Low Emissions Strategy and it was acknowledged that Transition Exeter would be a valuable partner in this work.

The questions and replies from the Assistant Director Environment (in italics) are appended to the minutes.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the suggestion of involving Transition Exeter as a partner with the City Council in progressing the Low Emissions Strategy.

The Chair thanked both Mr Duley and Ms Stephens for attending the meeting and putting their questions to the Committee.

### **MATTER FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – COMMUNITY**

#### **42 Update on the Impact of Welfare Reform on the Council and Residents**

The Housing Benefit Manager presented the report informing Members of the impact of the Government's Welfare Reform and the associated reductions in welfare budgets, introduced in April 2013. She advised of an amendment to the report by the addition of the words "on collection" after impact in the second line of paragraph 14.0.

The Mobile Benefits Training Officer detailed issues relating to council tax support, the benefit cap, social sector size criteria and need for downsizing, changes in Council tax instructions from 10 to 12 months, local welfare support and discretionary housing payments.

It was noted that the changes were impacting beyond the Council into the Third Sector with a 27% increase in inquiries at the Citizens Advice Bureau in the first quarter of this year with a 78% increase in referrals to the food bank in the last 12 months.

The following responses were given to Members' questions:-

- there is a greater crossover of Council/agency staff with CAB and Homemaker representatives based in the Customer Service Centre to take referrals and a City Council officer located part time at Job Centre Plus to provide housing and benefit advice. The latter can also identify areas where practises could be improved;
- improved partnership work is also evident in other areas with strong co-operation with Devon County Council, the Police and Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service. Similarly, the Welfare Reform Action Group, with representation from many agencies, has also been a success;
- the City Council administers welfare support on behalf of the County Council; and
- the impact of changes to the Disability Living Allowance were likely to become increasingly apparent by October with the full affect of the Universal Credit Scheme to become apparent by April 2014.

The Chair and Members thanked officers for the comprehensive report and the hard work of staff in this transition period.

Scrutiny Committee – Community noted the contents of the report and, expressing their concern at the affect of welfare reform on the residents of Exeter, requested further update reports on the impact on both the Council and Exeter residents, including the potential impact of the introduction of Universal Credit.

(Report circulated)

### **PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

#### **43 Housing Revenue Account - Budget Monitoring to June 2013**

The Housing Operations Manager presented the report on major differences by management unit to the outturn forecast for the first three months of the financial year up to 30 June 2013. During this period, the total of the variances indicated that

there would be a net surplus of £583,238, which would be transferred from the working balance at 31 March 2014. This represented a reduction of £1,128,922 compared to the original budgeted surplus of £1,712,160. It was estimated that the working balance would stand at £6,873,535 at 31 March 2014.

The Housing Operations Manager, responding to a Member's query, advised that annual checks were made in respect of gas central heating systems which included the testing of smoke detectors.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

#### 44 **Community - Budget Monitoring to June 2013**

The Principal Accountant presented the report advising Members of any major differences by management unit to the revised budget. The current forecast suggests that net expenditure for this Committee will increase from the revised budget by a total of £45,260 which represents a variation of 0.41% from the revised budget.

The current capital programme showed a total forecast spend of £4,249,531 in 2013/14 with £1,498,805 of the programme expected to be deferred until 2014/15.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

### **MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION BY EXECUTIVE**

#### 45 **Asset Management Review - Housing Garage Sites**

The Housing Operations Manager presented the report setting out the outcome of an asset management review of the City Council's garage sites and recommendations for estate rationalisation.

The report covered proposals for the re-development of garage sites, disposal, investment to ensure existing garages are fit for purpose, demolition and use for storage.

The Council currently owned 930 garages over 65 sites. Since 2009, around 60 garages a year had been vacant, representing around £26,500 in lost rental income each year. Despite several initiatives, the number of empty garages was not reducing. The garages had the potential to generate total income in the region of £470,000 per annum, depending on the type of tenant and the location of the garage.

A Member was concerned that the Council should maintain its stock of garages at a level which would enable the Council to continue to provide garage space to local charities and community organisations. This would be picked up during the consultation process. It was noted that the current processes relating to garage use were custom and practise and that there was no official Council policy.

Scrutiny Committee - Community requested Executive to:-

(1) support the report; and

- (2) approve the proposals set out in the report in principle for consultation with Ward Members and the Tenants' and Leaseholders' Committee and for detailed consideration by Executive in November.

(Report circulated)

#### 46 **Home Energy Conservation Report and Energy Company Obligation Funding**

The Assistant Director Environment presented the report updating Members on the Council's duties relating to home energy conservation and work being conducted on procuring an Energy Company Obligation (ECO) provider.

Responding to Members, he advised that a pan-Devon approach was the most cost effective method of procurement likely to yield greatest benefit from a provider and that, whilst some of the larger housing associations might engage an alternative provider, they could participate in the scheme. The procurement addressed local supply chains and local skills.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the report and requested Executive to:-

- (1) note the contents of the Home Energy Conservation report; and
- (2) agree to the proposed procurement route, as set out in the report, that is the Council select a partner for Energy Company Obligation delivery and co-ordinate delivery in partnership with that company including marketing support.

(Report circulated)

#### 47 **Local Air Quality Management Air Quality Action Plan 2011-2016 and 2013 Air Quality Progress Report**

The Assistant Director Environment presented the report updating Members on the Council's duties relating to local air quality management and work being conducted on Low Emissions Strategy. The report set out the four objectives of the Second Air Quality Action Plan and the three strategic objectives of the Low Emission Strategy which had been funded by DEFRA in the sum of £60,000 to identify and implement measures to reduce emissions and contribute towards the EU limit values, the project to be completed within 18 months. The engagement of a consultant would be funded from the above budget.

The Chief Executive & Growth Director emphasised the importance of a balanced approach to encouraging the economic growth of the City as well as maintaining air quality standards. He referred to the many transport initiatives in Exeter in recent years as part of Devon County Council's Transport Plans which had successfully led to the growth in patronage of public transport and stopped growth in car usage. Transport policy in the City reflected the City's importance as the economic hub of the area as well as the increasing number of homes that had to be built, both in the City and on the outskirts.

In addition to inward commuter/shopper journeys, a Member suggested that movements within and out of the City, such as to shopping centres, were also significant.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report and requested Executive to note the progress on the Air Quality Action Plan and to support the development of a Low Emissions Strategy to fulfil air quality objectives.

(Report circulated)

### **PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

#### **48 Parkwood Leisure Centre Contract**

Members noted that, in accordance with the Constitution and the responsibilities of the respective Portfolio Holders, in future, the minutes of meetings of the Parkwood Leisure Services Working Group would be reported to Scrutiny Committee - Economy.

The Chair thanked those Members of this Committee who had served on this working group.

The minutes of the meetings of the Parkwood Leisure Services Working Group held on 3 June and 15 July 2013 were received.

(Minutes circulated)

#### **49 Minutes of the Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Panel**

The minutes of Police and Crime Panel meetings were circulated after each meeting to Members of this Committee to enable them to raise any issues of concern or interest at these Scrutiny meetings. No issues were raised.

#### **50 Work Schedule Programme Meeting**

Members considered suggested topics for scrutiny as put forward at a scrutiny work programme meeting on 25 July 2103.

The Assistant Director Environment confirmed that he would be attending a seminar arranged by the Police and Crime Commissioner in September on alcohol related issues where he would be able to represent the viewpoint of licensing authorities. A Member suggested that the Commissioner was not fully appreciative of the significance of Exeter in a crime and policing context having focussed more on rural issues.

Scrutiny Committee - Community:-

- (1) agreed to invite the Police and Crime Commissioner to address a future Scrutiny Committee; and
- (2) supported the list of high, medium and low priority suggestions for future scrutiny work, noting that a programme would now be progressed in liaison with the Chairs of the three Scrutiny Committees.

(Report circulated)

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.00 pm

Chair

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# Minute Item 41

## QUESTION FROM A MEMBER OF PUBLIC

### UNDERSTANDING ORDER NO.19

#### SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY – 3 SEPTEMBER 2013

#### QUESTION FROM MR DULEY

##### PREAMBLE – MY REASONS FOR SUBMITTING QUESTIONS

- Concern for the wasted capacity of Exeter City Council Social Housing stock/units
- Observation that housing units remain vacant for longer periods than necessary
- Every empty home represents a potential home for people in need
- Impression that too many ECC Housing Units are awaiting occupation
- Realisation that the opportunity is often taken to upgrade properties when they fall vacant
- There is a desperate need for affordable rented housing in the city
- Vacant units are a wasted resource and should be minimised
- Better use of tenants notice period would reduce delays in allocation
- Evidence would suggest that the allocation system is inefficient
- Reduction of those in most need on The Housing List should be priority task
- Lost revenue should be an incentive to minimise turn around of tenancies

##### QUESTIONS TO SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

##### Re: Optimum Use of Exeter City Council Housing Stock

The demand for social housing in this City of Exeter is ever increasing and it is a duty of the City Council to make best use of its housing stock. Since there is a prime responsibility of Councillors to ensure the best use of public assets can you please provide the following information:-

1. What was the average percentage and number of Exeter City Council (ECC) Housing Units empty at any time during 2012/2013?

The average number of ECC properties empty at any one time during 2012-2013 was 43. This represents 0.85% of a total housing stock of over 5,000.

2. What was the lost revenue to ECC in 2012/13 from housing stock not occupied?

The amount of rent not collected while the properties are vacant for 2012-2013 was £220,811. This represents 1.17% of a total rental income of £18,866,355.20.

3. What performance measures are used by ECC to reduce the lost revenue and the period that housing units remain empty between tenancies?

Performance measures in the widest sense include:

- Monitoring of performance in our Quarterly Performance Digest. A suite of some 40 or so performance indicators is produced every quarter in the form of the Digest which is then considered at a Performance Review Committee (PRC) made up of residents and Councillors. At the PRC meeting Council managers are invited to discuss and comment on the performance of their teams. The Committee as a whole makes suggestions for possible improvements in the future.
- Weekly meetings on void properties attended by operational managers and officers where individual cases are discussed

- Weekly meetings of Council technical staff with void contractors to review progress on void properties
- Weekly meetings of operational managers and officers to discuss 'direct matching' cases (i.e. where we make allocation decisions in the best interests of clients rather than them having to go through the Devon Home Choice system)
- The employment of a full-time Voids Co-ordinator to undertake the operational work around letting a property (principally signing up the new tenants)
- The imminent appointment of a temporary full-time Downsizing Officer to encourage downsizing and to help downsizers through the whole process of moving to smaller alternative accommodation

#### 4. Is the Homechoice allocation system efficient enough to provide the maximum use of Social Housing Stock available in the City?

This is an interesting question and one that is currently being tested as part of a review of how we let our properties and solve people's housing problems.

Our preliminary findings have shown that for properties which have adaptations or meet a specific housing need (e.g. level access) a Choice Based Lettings scheme like Devon Home Choice does not necessarily result in the right person securing the property, as waiting time is not the best indicator of critical need.

However, for General Needs properties Devon Home Choice is the quickest way to find a tenant for a vacancy using objective criteria. We probably could achieve lower void times by making direct matches, but we would not then be best meeting housing need. We would not necessarily be providing a fair system and we would be pushing tenants into properties they may not want and so undermining the success of our communities.

#### 5. How does Exeter City Council housing occupancy performance compare to that of local Housing Associations?

- Rent lost through dwellings being vacant: Of the 278 housing organisations **nationwide** that submitted data to Housemark (the national benchmarking organisation), we finished in 170<sup>th</sup> position (third quartile). **Locally**, featuring only housing organisations in the south-west of England, we came 19<sup>th</sup> out of 22 organisations (bottom quartile)
- Average re-let times: Of the 263 housing organisations **nationwide** that submitted data to Housemark, we finished in 182<sup>nd</sup> position (third quartile). **Locally**, featuring only housing organisations in the south-west of England, we came 18<sup>th</sup> out of 24 organisations (third quartile)

We know that on average people in high need are waiting 15 months for a social rented home and we do not want to see wasted capacity in Exeter City Council's Social Housing stock. About 310 properties in our stock become void each year and the average rate of turnover is 6%. A very small number (3) properties in our stock have been empty for over a year as a result of exceptional circumstances. Tenders are currently being let to undertake the works to bring these properties back into use. We do take the opportunity is often taken to upgrade properties when they fall vacant and the cost of the upgrades and the length of time it takes to do them has increased significantly over the past few years.

However, we do not necessarily share the assumption that the main focus of a void management service should be the minimisation of void times, thus protecting rent revenue and marginally reducing waiting times for people on the housing register. While this is undoubtedly important, our primary concerns in letting properties are:

- To let the right property to the right person

- To renovate the properties properly to minimise expensive reactive repairs in the future
- To make sure our processes are efficient and so that the time between us receiving the keys and re-letting the property is reduced

For example, if our only concern was letting properties as quickly as possible we may well let a property to someone whose needs don't match what the property offers and we would need to adapt the home for them after they move in - or worse, if they need to move to another property shortly afterwards. In addition, by focussing only on void times, we would do the bare minimum to prepare the property for its new tenants but we know that this results in a more costly series of additional works after they have moved in and low levels of satisfaction.

We know that our comparative performance on voids is not good but our overall budget position is strong and void satisfaction levels are high. We have agreed with our residents a relatively new set of 'Home Property Standards' where we specify the standard of accommodation new tenants can expect when they move into one of our homes. We know that these new standards are largely responsible for us taking longer to let properties than we did two years ago but we also know that our tenants are much happier with the product they receive.

In summary, we believe that by concentrating on making sure that the void property meets the specific reasonable demands of its new tenant we make savings which exceed any additional time properties are un-tenanted. And we believe that we can make significant improvements to the efficiency of our overall repairs business, of which void repair is one element. We are in the process of collecting and reviewing detailed data in order to evidence this. As part of this review we are testing different ways of working to assess which is the best overall. We are also looking at how to better use the tenants' notice period to reduce delays in allocation and at the inefficiencies in the allocation system itself. This review will take some months to complete, but once it is done we would hope to have increased levels of satisfaction and reduced costs across the repairs budgets as a whole. We anticipate that this will reduce void times but our objective is an improved service at a lower overall cost, rather than lower void times specifically.

**Councillor Rob Hannaford**  
**Portfolio Holder Housing and Customer Access**

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## QUESTION FROM A MEMBER OF PUBLIC

### UNDER STANDING ORDER NO.19

#### SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY – 3 SEPTEMBER 2013

#### QUESTION FROM GILL WESTCOTT

I am writing on behalf of Transition Exeter Transport Group to ask whether we could bring some concerns before the Scrutiny Community Committee next Tuesday 3rd September. If possible someone will attend to ask a question, but in case this is not possible, we wished to

- a) congratulate Exeter City Council on measures to increase walking and cycling and improve public transport, and on the reduction in pollution levels at some location; We appreciate the commitment of time and finance this has taken.
- b) express concern about the continued increase in nitrous oxide at some of the main routes into town, including Heavitree Fore St and Cowick Street which are residential and shopping areas.
- c) ask how the impact of housing developments at Cranbrook, Newcourt, Monkerton and near Alphington on air quality can be more accurately assessed, and to what extent developers can contribute to improving sustainable and less polluting transport options.
- d) Similarly, with the IKEA development with 800 parking spaces, will efforts be made to minimise car journeys, support alternative travel possibilities, car clubs etc.?
- e) Would ECC consider insisting on a proportion of car-free developments at new development sites with viable sustainable transport options from the beginning ?

#### Answers

- a) *Thank you, we do try to encourage interest and participation in air quality issues by community, business and local interest groups, so your presence at the committee meeting, and your questions are welcome.*
- b) *The levels do not show a trend of significant and widespread increase and we do not therefore believe that air quality in Exeter is worsening. There are hotspots however where, as the report states, Government guideline levels for nitrogen dioxide are exceeded. These guidelines are set at a very precautionary level and so the actual impact on health is likely to be very small, but those with pre-existing respiratory problems could find that these are exacerbated in the vicinity of the very busiest roads. We are working with the Health and Wellbeing Board at DCC to understand the nature and extent of any health effects and what action could be appropriate as a result.*
- c) *The cumulative impact of the developments has been considered at the master planning stage and the individual impact of each planning application will also be assessed through the development control process. Any unacceptable air quality impacts would require mitigation by the developer.*

*Developers are already required to contribute towards sustainable transport and highways works by DCC through S.106 agreements, or the new CIL. These contributions are welcomed by us, because the works which DCC will carry out using this money to alleviate congestion will also improve air quality. Although the large new areas of development have the potential to increase traffic congestion and air pollution, they will be a mechanism by which significant improvements in public transport infrastructure can be achieved. It is intended that these improvements will offset any worsening as a result of the developments. Because the new infrastructure will also be available to existing residents, the developments actually have the potential to improve on the current situation as well.*

*The development control requirements for sustainable transport infrastructure on development sites themselves are set out in the Sustainable Transport SPG, which is available on the website. For more information on this, please speak to Ross Hussey.*

- d) Yes. The specifics of this application will be being handled by Richard and Lee, so I am not aware of them. It should be noted though that most of the traffic generated by the IKEA store will simply leave the motorway and travel straight to the site, so it will have limited impact on residential parts of Exeter.*
- e) This type of measure would be welcomed in air quality terms, however when making development control decisions, air quality considerations have to be balanced against all other issues. The current ECC policy is set out in the Sustainable Transport SPG.*

*With regard to whether the Low Emission Strategy project was a good use of Council money, because it appears to be research rather than a solution it was DEFRA money not ours. Secondly, although it does involve a significant proportion of research, the intention of this is to develop evidence based policy solutions. The project is therefore an excellent thing to be doing!*

**28 August 2013**