

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

12 November 2013

Present:

Councillor Norman Shiel (Chair)

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

Apologies:

Councillors Bull and Choules

Also present:

Deputy Chief Executive, Assistant Director Customer Access, Assistant Director Environment, Assistant Director Housing and Contracts, Housing Operations Manager, Principal Accountant (SR), Mobile Benefits Training Officer, Housing Options Manager, Housing Needs Manager and Democratic Services Officer (Committees) (HB)

51 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 September 2013 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

52 Declaration of Interests

No disclosable pecuniary interests were declared.

ITEMS FOR SCRUTINY COMMITTEE DISCUSSION

53 Key Propositions from the LGA's publications - "Re-wiring Public Services"

The Deputy Chief Executive reported on issues arising from the visit of Sir Merrick Cockell, Chairman of the Local Government Association and his presentation on the LGA's publication – "Re-wiring Public Services". The document was a response to the severe funding constraints imposed on local authorities and the need to identify new methodology for the delivery of services. Ten key propositions had emerged from the document with the appropriate Scrutiny Committees identified for each should Members wish to give detailed consideration to any of the themes.

The following responses were given to Members' queries:-

- the need for an equitable distribution of funding for local authorities across the UK was widely recognised which could be achieved by replacing the Barnett formula with a needs-based funding model;
- although merging Government departments would reduce bureaucracy, the loss of expertise within Local Government and the Civil Service was an issue; and
- closer partnership working at local level with other bodies such as the Police and Public Health as well as neighbouring authorities would increase in importance.

The Deputy Chief Executive advised that the views of the other Scrutiny Committees would also be sought in order to determine the Council's response to the LGA

document. It was hoped that it would act as a stimulus to the ongoing process of identifying and progressing new and innovative ways of achieving service delivery.

54 **Housing Revenue Account Budget Monitoring to September 2013**

The Assistant Director Housing and Contracts presented the report on major differences by management unit to the outturn forecast for the first six months of the financial year up to 30 September 2013. During this period, the total of the variances indicated that there would be a net surplus of £36,885. This represented a reduction of £1,562,160 compared to the revised budgeted surplus of £1,562,160. It was estimated that the working balance would stand at £3,327,181 at 31 March 2014.

He explained that approximately half of the variances were due to decisions taken by Executive subsequent to budgets being set, specifically for the acquisition of flats at Dean Clarke House and towards the next phase of building new Council stock. He further advised that there were additional cost pressures of approximately £775,000 in the empty properties and reactive repairs budgets and these accounted for the remaining variations in the overall Housing Revenue Account figures. Work was now underway to identify why there were such pressures on the empty properties and reactive repairs budgets and what could be done about them.

In response to Members, the Housing Operations Manager enlarged on the methodology of responding to repair requests including the repair of voids and advised that a review of void repairs was in progress. It was noted that there was a significant minority of properties with a disproportionate call on the re-active repair budget. Members felt that there was insufficient detail in explaining the areas of overspend and requested a further report.

Scrutiny Committee – Community:-

- (1) noted the report; and
- (2) requested a further report on the overspend for submission to a future meeting of this Committee.

(Report circulated)

55 **Community Budget Monitoring to September 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 £84,520 which represents a variation of 0.76% from the revised budget.

The current capital programme showed a total forecast spend of £4,372,880 in 2013/14.

The Principal Accountant reported that the cost of dealing with illegal campers exceeded the budget by £75,000. This did not include the associated costs of cleaning up, which had been absorbed by the Parks and Open Spaces service. The Deputy Chief Executive enlarged on this problem, caused largely by rough sleepers with tents, whose occasional aggressive behaviour necessitated the use of bailiffs to secure their removal. The Council worked with Devon County Council on this issue, the County also contributing to removal costs. Referring to the impact on environmental protection of recent redundancies he emphasised that reductions in Government funding would impact further on service delivery. Responding to a

Member who sought further detail of cleansing costs, he reminded Members of Scrutiny Committee powers and of their ability to summon officers to report to the Committee.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

ITEMS FOR EXECUTIVE

56 Improving Housing Resident Involvement

The Assistant Director Housing and Contracts presented the report seeking Members' approval for improving the way that the Council involved its housing residents in the management and strategic direction of the services they receive. He remarked that the approach set out in the report reflected the Council's commitment to new ways of working introduced by the systems review process and changes to the regulatory framework in which housing operates. Also, because of the change over in Assistant Director responsibilities and as he was not the report author it was likely that the methodology proposed in the report would be fine tuned to enable the Housing Performance and Projects Manager to focus on other tasks and to expand residents' involvement beyond simply the remit of the Performance Scrutiny Partnership. He also commented that careful thought needed to be given on how best to recruit new members of the Performance Scrutiny Partnership going forward in order to obtain a representative cross-section of opinion.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report and requested Executive to approve:-

- (1) the new direction for Housing Resident Involvement;
- (2) the proposal to dismantle the existing Resident Involvement governance structure and create a single Performance Scrutiny Partnership from 1 April 2014;
- (3) the redundancy of the Housing Resident Involvement Manager from 1 April 2014; and
- (4) the creation of a new part-time administrative role from 1 April 2014.

(Report circulated)

57 Environmental Performance

The Assistant Director Environment presented the report setting out an updated Environmental Performance report in a single document format and seeking Members' approval for a revision of the three strategies in one overall strategy. Following consultation, a final report would be brought back to Members for approval in the New Year.

The following responses were given to Members' questions:-

- the Exeter Together collective energy purchasing scheme evaluation had produced some extremely useful learning points which had been fed to the Department of Energy and Climate Change evaluation of the national project,

published recently. The project was focussed on learning about behavioural change and what motivates people to switch energy providers;

- air quality in Exeter was generally good but trigger points for Nitrous Oxide were exceeded at times along the main arterial routes into the City. Reducing vehicle use, by encouraging park and ride and cycling etc. were all factors which reduced Nitrous Oxide levels;
- there had been a decrease in grey waste collection per head; recycling rates were largely static partly resulting from reduced packaging and newspaper purchase; and
- work was underway to encourage greater take-up of composting e.g. with Council tenants.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report and requested Executive to approve:-

- (1) the revision of the Environmental, Carbon Management and Climate Change strategies in to one encompassing strategy; and
- (2) a revised Environmental Performance Strategy being submitted to them in draft form for consultation in Spring 2014 and subsequent approval following consultation.

(Report circulated)

ITEMS FOR INFORMATION ONLY

58 Devon Home Choice

The Chair, following a meeting of the Housing Performance Review Committee which included representatives of the tenants, had requested a report on the operation of Devon Home Choice including the bidding patterns of applicants registered in Exeter with the scheme and also the rate of refusals from people offered properties.

The Housing Options Manager spoke to a presentation updating Members on statistics in the following areas:-

- refusals of allocated properties since April 2013;
- percentage of households in housing need bidding for houses; and
- benefits and challenges of Devon Home Choice as an allocation system.

He responded as follows to Members' questions:-

- all those refusing offers of accommodation were asked for reasons but many did not provide meaningful answers;
- Devon Home Choice offered a better choice than the previous system and was not as rigid; and
- downsizing was encouraged and a key element was the provision of new smaller homes in the right location. Focussed support from housing staff seemed to work better than offering financial incentives.

Members supported the proposal of forming a Task and Finish Group to evaluate the operation of Devon Home Choice and determine whether the system should be retained or alternatives considered.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the establishment of a Devon Home Choice Task and Finish Group comprising Councillors Crow, Mitchell and Morris.

59 **Universal Credit Update**

The Assistant Director Customer Access presented the report updating Members on the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Universal Credit proposal.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the current update on the Universal Credit and requested the submission of further updates on a six monthly basis.

(Report circulated)

60 **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.

The Chair confirmed that Tony Hogg, the Police and Crime Commissioner, had been requested to attend a meeting of this Committee and that he was looking to identify a suitable date when he would be free.

61 **Task and Finish Groups**

RESOLVED that membership of the following Task and Finish Groups be confirmed as set out:-

- **Health Issues** - Councillors Macdonald, Payne and Shiel
- **Community Patrol** - Councillors Clark, Mitchell and Mottram

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.00 pm

Chair