

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

19 January 2016

Present:

Councillor Emma Morse (Chair)

Councillors Brimble, Bull, Buswell, George, Hannan, Holland, Packham, Raybould, Shiel, Vizard and Wardle

Apologies:

Councillor Newby

Also present:

Chief Executive & Growth Director, Deputy Chief Executive, Assistant Director Housing, Assistant Director Customer Access, Service Lead Housing, Service Lead Performance, Strategy and Resources, Technical Accounting Manager, Principal Accountant Corporate and Democratic Services Officer (Committees) (HB)

In attendance:

Councillor Rob Hannaford	- Portfolio Holder Housing Revenue Account
Councillor Keith Owen	- Portfolio Holder Health and Place
Councillor Rachel Sutton	- Portfolio Holder City Development

1 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2015 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

2 **Declaration of Interests**

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

3 **Development of the Council's Homelessness Strategy - Draft for Consultation**

The Assistant Director Customer Access presented the report setting out the draft Homelessness Strategy for Exeter and Teignbridge which had been developed from the findings and recommendations of the Task and Finish Group convened to review homelessness in the City and to help form and shape the new Homelessness Strategy and action plan. The group had been chaired by Councillor Harvey and involved representatives from both Councils.

The System Lead - Housing spoke on the following themes set out within the strategy including the aims summary for each and the proposed action points:-

- A Place to Live
- Access to Services
- Health and Protection; and
- Money Matters

The Chair welcomed the report which had been identified by the Portfolio Holder for Customer Access as a priority.

The System Lead - Housing responded to Members queries:-

- the Safe Sleep Exeter facility was 65-70% occupied with seven individuals identified for longer term accommodation with three pending, the scheme to be evaluated at the end of March. Working closely with the Police and local providers to look at options for rough sleepers whose behaviour and substance misuse was not manageable in a shelter setting;
- regarding the distribution of sleeping bags and food from various sources, there was an increased desire to work with providers to work towards a co-ordinated response with a consistent message of encouraging the homeless to engage with statutory services and seek solutions to their situations;
- in the face of increasing budget cuts, the need for smarter working was acknowledged to eliminate duplication and increase efficiencies. The Integrated Care Exeter initiative was key in this respect. Work was already in progress with regard to local engagement with the Community Rehabilitation Companies;
- an alternative model for housing victims of domestic abuse and violence was being piloted which differed from the traditional refuge model;
- although a number of partners were involved in the development of the strategy, there was no clear framework catering for volunteering. The first step would be to establish closer links with agencies and provide a forum for all those involved in working with the homeless; and
- no direct support from private sector investors had materialised to date.

Scrutiny Committee - Community agreed the content and aims of the draft Homelessness Strategy 2016-2021 as a draft for consultation and supported a public consultation to gain feedback from stake-holders and other interested parties.

4 **Reports of Portfolio Holders**

Councillors Owen and Hannaford presented the progress reports on priorities within the Health and Place and Housing Revenue Account Portfolios respectively. Apologies had been received from Councillor Morris, the Portfolio Holder for Customer Access. Responses to Members' queries are set out below:-

Health and Place

The Portfolio Holder reported that the period for the public consultation on the proposed Public Spaces Protection Order had been extended from 22 January to 29 February. Because of the purdah period, the reporting through the Committee cycle would therefore take place after the May Elections. The report was therefore scheduled for consideration during the June/July cycle which would be at the same timescale proposed for the consideration and adoption of the Homelessness Strategy. He emphasised that no decision had been taken in respect of the Order and that consideration would be given to suggestions and remedies to identified problems for inclusion in any Order.

With regard to the cleansing of the City Centre and implementing ways of Keeping the City Looking Good, he referred to the public consultation undertaken on the prioritisation of resources when the public had expressed a preference for ensuring high standards of cleanliness for the City Centre. He was seeking to discuss this aspect with the Business Improvement District Chief Executive.

Customer Access

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Customer Access, the Deputy Chief Executive undertook to respond to queries relating to the timescale for the tendering process relating to working in conjunction with a Credit Union and on personnel issues relating to the new Assertive Homeless Outreach Service.

Housing Revenue Account

The Portfolio Holder spoke on all five points within his update.

The Assistant Director Housing responded to a Member who expressed concern over incidents of anti-social behaviour on Council housing estates. With regard to the Housing Strategy, which was scheduled for submission to the next Scrutiny Committee in March, he advised that it was a high level policy document and would not detail operational matters such as responses to anti-social behaviour. However, the anti-social behaviour policy, as well as policies relating to tenancy agreements, were being reviewed, with reports to be brought to this Committee later in the year. They incorporated proposals to tighten procedures relating to reported problems of anti-social behaviour. He also referred to protocols followed by Environmental Health Officers, with Police presence if necessary, when visiting families affected by this behaviour, including those households with disabled individuals.

As the Committee would have the opportunity to review the above policies, a suggestion of establishing a Task and Finish Group in respect of anti-social behaviour was not supported.

The Chair invited the Portfolio Holder for City Development to the table to respond to a query from a Member on working with the University on student accommodation issues. The Portfolio Holder advised that both the Planning Member Working Group and the University Task and Finish Working Group were to consider a commissioned report on these issues, the report providing background information relevant to current and expected planning applications and the evolution of Council planning policies. There were concerns that recent purpose built student developments were increasingly focussed on "high end, luxury" accommodation which might not attract students from privately rented houses which otherwise could help ease the wider housing need.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the reports.

ESTIMATES, CAPITAL PROGRAMME AND FEES AND CHARGES

5 Community - Housing Revenue Account - Estimates/New Capital Bids/Fees : 2016/17

The Technical Accounting Manager presented the report on the Housing Revenue Account Estimates and Fees and Charges, which outlined the strategic framework within which the estimates had been prepared, changes in accounting practices which affected all budgets and gave detailed reasons for major changes in the Management Unit estimates. A detailed schedule of the capital programme for Housing was also attached to the report together with details of the Council Own Build programme.

A Member highlighted the two year LAINGS refurbishment programme and the St Loyes Extracare Scheme set out in the Capital Programme for 2016/17 and future

years. The latter represented some 20% of the total programme and his suggestion that a Programme Board involving City Council Members and with County Council representation be established was supported.

Scrutiny Committee – Community:-

- (1) supported the draft Revenue Estimates for 2016/17, the proposed Capital Programme, Fees and Charges and Council Own Build for further consideration by Executive on 10 February 2016 and Council on 23 February 2016; and
- (2) supported an appropriate governance structure in respect of the St Loyes Extracare Scheme.

6 Community - General Fund - Estimates/New Capital Bids/Fees and Charges : 2016/17

The Principal Accountant presented the report on the Community Revenue Account Estimates and Fees and Charges, which outlined the strategic framework within which the estimates had been prepared; changes in accounting practices which affected all budgets and gave detailed reasons for major changes in the Management Unit estimates. A detailed schedule of the capital programme for Community was also attached to the report.

The Government had announced the provisional Local Government Settlement on 17 December 2015. The Council was to receive £2.022 million Revenue Support Grant in 2016/17 and had been set a Business Rates Baseline of £3.780 million, which overall was £156k lower than predicted within the Medium Term Financial Plan. At this stage, there was no intention to revisit the budgets set. The final settlement was expected in late January but the initial figures were very close to those anticipated.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the draft Revenue Estimates for 2016/17, the proposed Capital Programme and Fees and Charges for further consideration by Executive on 10 February 2016 and Council on 23 February 2016.

ITEMS FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE EXECUTIVE

7 Housing Rents and Services Charges : 2016/17

The Technical Accounting Manager presented the report recommending a 1% rent decrease for council dwellings from 1 April 2016.

Until the Government's Summer Budget announcement, social housing rents had been expected to increase by Consumer Price Index inflation plus 1% annually for ten years; 2015-16 to 2024-25. This was intended to give landlords certainty in order to help them plan for future investment. The 10 year inflation linked rent settlement had been replaced with a new rent reduction policy announced in July, requiring social landlords to reduce rents by 1% annually for each of the next four years.

Members remarked on the difficulties resulting from the Government's policy changes and, in particular, the challenging nature of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill which was scheduled for enactment in April 2016. Allied to the 1% reduction in rental income, the welfare reforms were a further risk to council dwelling rents, in particular the move to Universal Credit and the reduction in the benefit cap.

Management techniques were being developed to support and encourage customer behaviour towards rent payment in order to help mitigate this risk.

Further erosion of local authority control of its housing stock would result from the enactment of the Housing and Planning Bill which required Councils to make payments to the Government in respect of their high-value vacant housing. The payments would be used to extend the Right-to-Buy to housing associations and to pay off debt attached to the sold properties. The Assistant Director Housing explained the implications of the proposals including a reduction in stock numbers in the event that the Council is required to sell vacant homes to recoup sufficient capital receipts. He stated that legal advice obtained was that the proposals could not be challenged on grounds of reasonableness. Again, mitigating measures were being put in place.

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

- (1) a reduction in rents for Council dwellings of 1% from 1 April 2016;
- (2) garage rents remaining at their 2015/16 level from 1 April 2016; and
- (3) service charges to remain at their 2015/16 level, with the exception of the charges specified below from 1 April 2016:-
 - (a) 1.2% increase in respect of cleaning communal areas in line with anticipated rises in cleaning contract costs;
 - (b) 3.5% increase in respect of fire alarm testing in line with rises in maintenance and monitoring contract costs; and
 - (e) 5% increase in respect of repair costs in line with Building Cost Information Service (BCIS) rates.

8 **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 - Exclusion of Press and Public**

RESOLVED that, under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 4 of Part 1, Schedule 12A of the Act.

9 **Future of Older Persons' Housing Services**

The Assistant Director Housing presented the report recommending on how best to provide housing and housing-related services to tenants in the City Council's older persons' accommodation in the coming financial year.

It was the intention to continue the current arrangements for this service for a further year and, in the meantime, develop an alternative model for supporting these tenants, which would be reported to Members for approval in due course.

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

- (1) no major changes to be made to the provision of the warden service in 2016/17. The HRA would continue to fund both the warden service and the emergency alarm system as it had been doing this year. The cost would not

exceed £131,000 which included £51,000 for supporting the emergency alarms. These arrangements would apply to existing tenants only;

- (2) new tenancies would only be offered to people over 60 years old who would not receive the warden service;
- (3) new tenants would have the use of a dispersed emergency alarm (paid for by themselves and provided through Home Call). Any hard-wired alarm would be removed prior to their moving in;
- (4) the contract for the maintenance of the current hard-wired system would be extended from April 2016 to March 2017. This would cost no more than £20,000 and was necessary to maintain the system; and
- (5) the part time Housing Community Partnerships Officer would start to explore initiatives for combating loneliness and isolation among older residents, with particular emphasis on social activities in the communal rooms which are currently under-utilised, with a view to moving to an alternative model of service delivery from 1 April 2017, subject to further consideration and approval by Members.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.55 pm

Chair

Points 1-2-7 are linked so I will expand on them collectively.

First I wish to thank Nicola and the team, Anne Marie and all members of the task and finish group for all their input into the strategy. It has been time well spent over the last few months.

Outside of the meetings I have continued to build relationships and links with organisations.

Nicola and I attended a networking day at the Armed Forces Hub in December, at the invite of the Transitions Coordinator at St Loyes Foundation, and through this we now have links with the Royal British Legion and SAFFA (the Armed Forces Charity) to ensure that we continue to honour and fulfil our responsibilities under the Armed Forces Covenant. We have also invited them to the customer service centre to meet front line staff and have discussed with them how we can help support veterans.

I also had an informal meeting with Jacinta Wainwright Chief Executive of SAFE, again, to build relationships and links between ECC and organisations who provide assistance to those who are homeless or are in danger of becoming homeless. Key to the success of the strategy is partnership working.

It's essential that we listen to them and work with them.

The strategy does state that the action plan will be reviewed twice a year and whilst we don't know what will happen at the elections in May, I do hope there will be some continuity with regards to who sits on the steering group, and that we will continue to ask for input from organisations so as to ensure the plan remains current, effective and serves its purpose.

Some homeless people living on the streets, have complex needs and are in need of assistance from i.e. mental health services The well-being hub, and the MEAM coordinator is key to being able to help vulnerable people most in need.

Also ICE will be a vital key to ensuring that vulnerable people receive the help they need as its aim is to work together to design and deliver new and better ways of working.

The targeted families programme continues and enters phase two. We will be more engaged with phase two and a report back will be given to Executive as to the effectiveness of the programme later in the year.

Priority 3

We are continuing to identify properties that need to be licensed due to additional licensing measures introduced earlier in 2015. We are doing this through adverts in the media and by officers actively seeking properties. The private rented forum is a very useful forum for engaging with letting agents, individual landlords as well as the CAB and individual tenants.

The landlord's handbook has been developed, some copies have been printed and it's available on line through the Council's website. Work is currently underway to develop a tenant's handbook. Both handbooks will help provide information on tenants/ landlords rights but also responsibilities.

Councillor Bull and I both attended the forums tenant information day in Princesshay which was successful.

We are also discussing the possibility of introducing an Exeter rental standard designed to assist tenants in finding good quality, well managed accommodation. The concept is for us to set a minimum standard that we say we would expect from landlords and letting agents.

This would fit together with another initiative that the forum discussed which is Homefinder. Homefinder is a software programme that can assist tenants with finding suitable properties. The idea is that landlords advertise via homefinder, which is a programme we would monitor and be responsible for, and anyone looking to rent in Exeter could access the site via a link on our website. Tenants would then know that all properties advertised have met a certain standard, as we would be able to set the criteria in order to rate the properties.

This is currently being discussed via the forum and is a very interesting concept.

Priority 4

Because a review of the council tax support scheme is being undertaken by DCLG it was agreed by Executive and Subsequently Full Council to retain the current scheme as it is for this year. However before making a decision on next year, I would suggest members seek information and figures on how residents are managing with contributing towards council tax where previously they have not been required to do so.

Priority 5

I am very pleased the CAB have been successful in obtaining funding so the excellent work of the money advice partnership has been able to continue.

Priority 6

This policy was agreed several months ago, no further update required.

Kind regards

Heather

Cllr Heather Morris
Labour City Cllr for Cowick ward
Portfolio Holder for Customer Access