

PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday 4 January 2018

Present:

Councillor Wardle (Chair)
Councillors Foggin, Holland, Morris, Thompson and Vizard N

Apologies:

Councillors Foale, Branston, Hannan and Hannaford

Also present:

Director (BA), Service Lead Housing Customers, Scrutiny Programme Officer, Technical Accounting Manager, Principal Accountant Corporate, Service Improvement Lead (Benefits) and Democratic Services Officer (Committees) (HB)

1

MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held on 2 November 2017 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

2

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests were made.

3

IMPACT OF AND PREPARATION FOR UNIVERSAL CREDIT ROLL OUT

The Benefits and Welfare Lead spoke to the presentation on the full service roll out of Universal Credit (UC) September 2018 highlighting the impact on customers, City Council services and external organisations and the preparations being done to support UC customers. He also covered those areas of the City Council which would be directly affected including housing benefit administration, payments and collections, customer service and housing advice and homelessness prevention. The circulated report informed Members that the Full Service rollout of UC in Exeter would commence from September 2018 and that, from that point on, all claims to legacy benefits would instead be claims to UC.

The Government's intention was to simplify and streamline the benefits system, improve work incentives, tackle poverty among low income families, and reduce the scope for fraud and error. Around 7 million individuals and families were expected to receive UC when it was fully introduced. Universal Credit Live Service had been in Exeter since November 2015 for single jobseekers with no dependent children. The rollout of the Full Service would vastly increase the rate at which households moved onto UC and would expand the groups who would be affected.

The Director (BA) emphasised that it was not possible to precisely predict the extent of the impact on demand, where this extra demand would be felt or how the staff skill base needed to change. No permanent change in resources was being recommended until further data on the impact was available. If appropriate, a further report would be brought to Members identifying the resourcing issues.

The following responses were given to Members' queries:-

- the Council was a member of the Devon wide Universal Credit Ambassadors' Group which had met twice. Valuable technical advice was available through the group and it was a useful forum for meeting other landlords;
- discretionary payments for both housing benefit and universal credit were a key tool to help prevent homelessness but there was concern that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) budget would be insufficient to support the Council's work;
- with an estimate of only 13% of private landlords willing to accept universal credit clients, the Council would be increasing its outreach to this group through mailshots etc. with a Benefit Support Team set up to further develop this work;
- with the DWP referring clients with money problems to the Civic Centre, the Council would be signing up as a delivery partner and support was already available through the Personal Budget Support Scheme. The Council would also benefit through increased rent collections; and
- alternative payment arrangements were available for certain households with problems such as domestic violence and it was up to the customer to ask for these arrangements to be put in place.

Members recognised the significant work undertaken in preparation for the roll out, noting that the extra measures were not a legal requirement and with the Portfolio Holder for People confirmed that planning had been ongoing for some time. She also referred to the recruitment of a Citizens Advice Bureau Money Management Advisor who was also training City Council staff in this work.

The Chair referred to the Section 151 Officer's advice that, although there was no immediate financial implications, there were financial risks arising out of the implementation of UC which were not known at this stage. Referring to delays in payments, increased debt and social housing providers seeking increases in advance rents, the Chair also highlighted the significant human cost the changes could bring, such as the threat of eviction and increased homelessness and a growth in demand for food parcels and asked for these issues to be brought to the attention of the Executive. This was supported by Members.

Scrutiny Committee - People noted the report and background information and requested Executive to:-

- (1) recognise that the support that can be given to customers impacted by Universal Credit via the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP), and Local Welfare. Support (LWS) budgets, as currently administered, is limited, and may need to be reviewed;
- (2) note that although without reliable predictions of the amount of extra demand that will be placed on affected services as a result of Universal Credit rollout, no further resources are requested at this present time but that there may be a need to request additional resources in the future. If evidence shows such a need, this data will be presented to Members for their decision;
- (3) agree that the Council will deliver digital and budgeting support to Universal Credit claimants as a delivery partner for the Department for Work and Pension's Universal Support scheme for 12 months from April 2018; and
- (4) note this Committee's concern regarding the anticipated human cost of these changes, including the impact on the residents of Exeter and the potential increase in homelessness. Members were also concerned about the impact on Council Services including income collection.

4

HOUSING RENTS AND SERVICE CHARGES : 2018/19

The Technical Accounting Manager presented the report recommending a 1% rent decrease for council dwellings from 1 April 2018.

The Service Lead Housing Customers clarified the requirements for service charges to cover communal areas and explained the work of the Older Persons Property Service Officers.

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

- (1) a reduction in rents for Council dwellings of 1% from 1 April 2018;
- (2) garage rents increasing by 4% from 1 April 2018; and
- (3) service charges to remain at their existing levels, with the exception of the charges specified below from 1 April 2018:-
 - 7% increase in respect of water at Magdalen Gardens in line with rises in water and sewerage charges;
 - 5% increase in electricity service charges to reflect utility costs;
 - 2.5% increase in respect of the Older Persons' property service charge in line with rises in employee costs; and
 - 5% reduction in respect of door entry systems in line with system maintenance costs.

5

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT - ESTIMATES/NEW CAPITAL BIDS/FEES : 2018/19

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. She highlighted key changes.

Responding to Members, the Service Lead Housing Customers advised that a report would be submitted to Executive on 9 January on a rebuild option for the remaining 17 Laings properties in the St Thomas ward, local Members would be involved in consultations on the proposed programme as some of the properties were occupied by residents. He also explained that the ZEBCat project was a joint scheme with the County Council and other partners providing retro cladding similar to passive house standards and undertook to report to a Member in respect of her concerns regarding communal doors.

People Scrutiny Committee supported the draft Revenue Estimates for 2018/19, the proposed Capital Programme, Fees and Charges and Council Own Build for further consideration by Executive on 13 February 2018 and Council on 20 February 2018.

6

PEOPLE - GENERAL FUND - ESTIMATES/NEW CAPITAL BIDS/FEES AND CHARGES : 2018/19

The Principal Accountant presented the report on the People 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 People was also attached to the report.

The Portfolio Holder for People explained that growing demand had led to the work of the Housing Needs Lead post increasing from 60% to 100%, the joint homelessness strategy having been developed in conjunction with Teignbridge District Council. She also reported that it was necessary to increase security at the Customer Service Centre as agencies such as the Department for Work and Pensions had reduced their opening hours leading to an increased time window where clients with complex needs sought the support of the City Council.

People Scrutiny Committee supported the draft Revenue Estimates for 2018/19, the proposed Capital Programme and Fees and Charges for further consideration by Executive on 13 February 2018 and Council on 20 February 2018.

7

GREEN TRAVEL PLANS AND PLANNING CONDITIONS SPOTLIGHT REVIEW

Councillor Harvey, Chair of the Green Travel Plans and Planning Conditions Spotlight Review Group, presented the findings and recommendations of the Group. He summarised its work with City Council Portfolio Holders and County Council officers having attended and highlighted the need for a new Task and Finish Group to focus on undertaking a monitoring exercise of IKEA's Green Travel Plan to identify how future plans could be improved upon.

He identified the need for much greater investment on a national scale as a key issue to address problems of congestion and referred to the historic fragmentation of planning and highways functions in the UK, explaining that, although Devon County Council and the City Council worked in partnership, their roles were different. With ever increasing traffic volumes, major incidents such as those that had occurred on the M5 and at Haldon Hill impacted severely on the City's road network. Examples of innovative schemes that had not progressed because of lack of funding were the Marsh Barton Rail Halt, an alternative rail link through Okehampton and the High Quality Transport System which would have been a commercially provided, laser guided bus service linking Cranbrook with Exeter as far as the University, with links to Pennsylvania and Topsham.

At a local level, a Member referred to parking problems in the Pennsylvania ward when school children were being dropped off and picked up for schools when cars parked blocking cycle routes and was advised that this matter should appropriately be raised at Exeter HATOC. Councillor Harvey also referred to the E4 strategic, bi directional, segregated cycle route leading from East Devon through Cumberland Way to the University in Exeter and to discussions on how best to route it through Union Road.

Members welcomed the work to date and the proposals for the Task and Finish Group, in particular to assess the role of the planning process and look to develop a more extensive policy package within planning conditions, including green travel conditions specifically tailored to each application.

Specific reference was made to the RD&E Hospital which employed some 7,000 people working different shifts but with only 600 parking spaces. As with other developments, there had been an impact on parking in residential areas, a Member referring to a suggestion for a multi storey car park as a possible solution to help

meet parking demand which might appropriately have been considered during the planning stage of various buildings on the hospital site. Another Member referred to firms within the Sowton Estate who could have been encouraged in the planning stage to run shuttle buses for their staff to and from the City Centre. EDF Energy for example had insufficient parking spaces although it was noted that EDF was very supportive of green travel implementing its green travel plan effectively. The Member also referred to a reduced bus service in the Pinhoe area which had increased travel to work by car resulting in commuters parking in residential areas.

The Scrutiny Programme Officer reported that she had sufficient volunteers already for the Task and Finish Group but that further Members were very welcome to join. She also confirmed that representatives of the Exeter Cycling Campaign could be invited to participate. In response to a Member, she advised that, in respect of the yet to be formed Transport Board, the terms of reference were being drafted. She also reassured Members that there was considerable work behind the scenes between the City Council and Devon Council in respect of green travel initiatives. It was also noted that the Council had to make planning decisions within its policies and Government guidelines which made it difficult to refuse an application if it complied with these, even if Members were not entirely satisfied with the extent of the green travel plan provided.

She stated that Members' views would be reported to Place Scrutiny Committee on 11 January which was also considering the Spotlight Review Group report.

Concluding, Members recognised the inherent challenges associated with the issues discussed, notably the adherence of the public to the convenience of car transport and the commercially driven ethos of public transport providers as recently exemplified by the withdrawal of the H bus service beyond St. David's Station.

People - Scrutiny Committee:-

- (1) acknowledged the work of the Spotlight Review Group;
- (2) agreed to share the report and findings with:-
 - the (yet to be formed) Transport Board;
 - Devon County Council in respect of the Sustainable Urban Movement Plan;
 - With Exeter City Council officers responsible for implementing the Parking Strategy; and
 - Greater Exeter Strategic Partnership; and
- (3) supported the formation of a Task and Finish Group to expressly monitor the IKEA green travel plan and ascertain what improvements to Green Travel Plans could be made in future.

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing, Communities and Sport responded to a Member who sought information on the social prescribing process whereby community connectors referred individuals to sporting and social groups to enhance their social interaction. She was concerned that the groups taking on individuals were adequately prepared with appropriately trained staff/volunteers and that the

connectors themselves were satisfied as to the capability of the individuals being referred to adapt satisfactorily.

The Portfolio Holder advised that he understood that the connectors undertook the necessary analysis of both the individuals and receiving groups but would liaise on this with the relevant Director for report back to the Member.

People - Scrutiny Committee noted the minutes of the meetings of the Exeter Health and Wellbeing Board of 12 September and 31 October 2017.

(The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.07 pm)

Chair