

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
(HELD AS A VIRTUAL MEETING)

25 June 2020

Present:

Councillor Matthew Vizard (Chair)

Councillors Mitchell, M, Foggin, Mrs Henson, Mitchell, K, Oliver, Martin, A, Quance, Sheldon, Sparkes, Wardle and Warwick

Apologies:

Councillors Begley and Pattison

Also present:

Deputy Chief Executive, Corporate Manager Democratic and Civic Support, Democratic Services Officer (HB) and Democratic Services Team Leader

In attendance:

- Portfolio Holder for Supporting People
- Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development and Services

12 Apologies

These were received from Councillors Begley and Pattison.

13 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 6 February 2020 were taken as read, approved as correct, for signing by the Chair at the earliest possible convenience.

14 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

15 Questions from the Public Under Standing Order No. 19

No questions from members of the public were received.

16 Presentation on Covid-19 by Portfolio Holders and Questions from Members and Answers

The Chair invited the two Portfolio Holders to present their respective briefing notes.

The schedule of questions from Members submitted in advance of the meeting, together with the answers provided at the meeting are set out in the appendix to

these minutes. The supplementary questions and answers given at the meeting are set out below for each Portfolio.

Portfolio Holder for Supporting People - Councillor Morse - in presenting her briefing note referred to the necessary closure of the Customer First area and the on-going support for vulnerable people made possible by the continuing commitment and hard work of Customer First, Housing, Public Health and HMO Licensing staff.

Responses to supplementary questions arising from the original questions from the Committee Members indicated.

- 1 Councillor K. Mitchell - Are there any additional initiatives planned in respect of rough sleeping due to the Covid-19 outbreak?

Is the funding anticipated from the Government ring fenced?

- *Regular contact is made with the Homelessness Advisory Support Team for updates on when the additional funding recently announced, as well as the previous funding for the Rough Sleeper initiatives, can be expected, details of which will be circulated when known. Both funds are ring fenced.*

- 2 Councillor K. Mitchell - What initiatives are to be taken with regard to rough sleepers particularly in the City Centre and will other Members be involved? Is priority given to rough sleepers from the Exeter area?

- *although every effort was made to house rough sleepers at the Great Western Hotel, not all agreed to be housed and some who were accommodated did not remain. Robust outreach work with this cohort continues to offer alternative accommodation and all Members will be appraised of progress;*
- *contact is made with the respective local authorities and their local agencies regarding those sleeping rough in Exeter who are not from this area in order to seek their return to their local connection. Regard is had to avoid unnecessary travel during the crisis and to help disease control;*
- *highly experienced staff work with the homeless, often with a detailed knowledge of an individual's particular circumstances, including potential risks to those cases of domestic abuse. In these circumstances, contact is made with the relevant agencies to ensure the safe return of the individuals when the time is appropriate;*
- *figures will be provided on homeless numbers; and*
- *it would have been helpful for the Government to have followed its announcement on the availability of extra funding with detailed information on the scheme including the timing of the release of funds.*

- 3 Councillor K. Mitchell and Councillor M. Mitchell - Should any future guidance to private sector landlords come from the City Council rather than a range of other agencies who also offer guidelines in respect of this sector?

Given the existence of some particularly poorly managed properties will discussions, including a roadshow, be held with the University prior to its re-opening later this year for lessons to be learnt and good practise reinforced?

- *the City Council is not in a position to provide guidance on Covid-19 related matters to the University in respect of private sector landlords but regular meetings are held with those who wish to engage;*
 - *the Government has prevented evictions during the present crisis; and*
 - *funding for a private sector “renting minefield” roadshow came from a one-off Government grant and it is not possible to support a further roadshow from the Council’s current budget. Accept the existence of poorly managed accommodation which the City Council, through its HMO licensing powers, seeks to address.*
- 4 Councillor K. Mitchell - Can local Members be regularly updated on meetings held with the University of Exeter on student related issues in the community?
- *officers will be requested to ensure this occurs.*
- 5 Councillor K. Mitchell - Can arrangements be made for a virtual meeting with the Exeter St. James Forum regarding issues arising from the COVID Lockdown?
- *there is regular dialogue with the St. James Forum both by myself and other agencies such as the Police and the University on the issues that have arisen during the Lockdown.*
- 6 Councillor M. Mitchell - Is there a specific recovery plan to assist those business tenants within the City Council’s property portfolio?
- *there is a specific recovery plan for businesses.*

Responses to supplementary questions arising from the original questions from the other Council Members indicated.

- 1 Councillor J. Moore – Can a specific policy be incorporated into existing procedures to guarantee that everyone is housed in case there is another Lockdown?
- *although every effort is made to support the homeless, those who are no longer in emergency accommodation and all others who found themselves in this position before this crisis, often have complex issues so it is not always possible to find suitable accommodation and, as such, a written policy would not be practical. The City Council works within its own local policy but this is in the context of national legislation. A legislative change would be necessary to seek to ensure no one is homeless in the event of a further Lockdown.*
- 2 Councillor J. Moore - can all debts of those vulnerable people housed temporarily at the Great Western Hotel be written off?
- Can the City Council write off any debt incurred through failure to pay the service charge?
- *on providing accommodation at the Hotel, all those re-housed were advised of the nature and re-payment staging of the service charge. The charge was not backdated;*
 - *all received three meals a day and the charge is in line with that for other temporary accommodation units across the city, so an*

exemption for those who stayed in the hotel would not have been equitable;

- *those who remained in financial difficulties were referred to the Exeter Wellbeing Hub for support and can also avail themselves of the money management advice through the Council and its partners;*
- *any remaining debt would not prejudice future options for housing in move-on accommodation;*
- *whilst benefitting financially, the Great Western Hotel, unlike some Hotel chains, was prepared to assist. An agreement was reached with the hotel on its, and the Council's, respective responsibilities to make good any damage etc.; and*
- *the Council has a debt recovery policy.*

3 Councillor D. Moore - When will the additional funding be provided and when does the accommodation in the Great Western Hotel end and the move to the Junction of those accommodated there commence? As Portfolio Holder can you highlight what has gone well in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and what lessons can be learnt for the future?

- *accommodation costs until the end of August are budgeted for within the service, thereafter other budget options will be assessed to seek to continue the housing of this cohort which may therefore impact on other areas of the service. It is hoped that there will be a smooth transition into alternative accommodation. It is hoped that the Government funding will be made available before the end of August but it is not expected to be sufficient to meet the significant additional costs incurred by local authorities during the Covid-19 crisis;*
- *a move on plan for each individual is being developed with community and voluntary sector partners and others to identify, creatively, alternative means of accommodation;*
- *this local authority has done all that has been asked of it and has responded in an exemplar fashion, developing its response even before central Government guidance had been provided. Significant additional work was taken on, particularly by the Customer Service staff who had been moved across to welfare support at the Exeter Wellbeing Hub and the private sector rental team. A greater lead in time was necessary in preparing a secure business support grant system.*

Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development and Services – Councillor Wright – in presented her briefing note highlighted the following:-

- continuing development work to meet the target of the 500 new homes delivery target for the Housing Revenue Account;
- work had commenced on the Laings development site; and
- good progress was being made on the Extra Care scheme/Bovemoors Lane development

Responses to supplementary questions arising from the original questions from another Council Member indicated.

1 Councillor D. Moore - Can the Council guarantee that there will be continued support to all vulnerable individuals when the Government's current initiatives during the Covid-19 crisis such as preventing evictions by landlords are lifted? What is the current level of income recovery?

- *the City Council remains committed to continuing its support to all those who are vulnerable at this period guided by its existing policies with clear practices to assist those who become homeless and/or fall into debt;*
- *support for the homeless needs to be considered within the context of the severe financial pressure the Council now faces to ensure that services continue as efficiently and cost effectively as possible; and*
- *the Council's overall financial position, including rate of incoming income, will be presented at a Members' briefing on 1 July 2020.*

The Chair, Portfolio Holders and Committee Members asked that their thanks be passed on to staff for their commitment, hard work and significant efforts during the current crisis.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.13 pm.

Chair

This page is intentionally left blank

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

25 JUNE 2020

ITEM 6: QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS ON COVID-19 AND ANSWERS

Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Supporting People – Councillor Morse

Questions from Committee Members

- 1 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - In January Exeter received an allocation of £917,850.00 for 20/21 from the Rough Sleeping Initiative allocations - please can you confirm if Exeter will still receive that amount in this financial year?

Yes. The senior advisor of the Homelessness Advisory Support Team (HAST) from MHCLG has stated that there is no intention to withdraw funding. HAST has agreed our plans for ensuring the 3 of the 10 project strands that were delayed as a result of covid now proceed without any financial clawback (including one which may be repurposed but the monies recycled into one of the other RSI projects, probably the night shelter).

- 2 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - Has any multi-agency planning occurred to develop a recovery strategy so that those currently staying in emergency accommodation are not faced with a return to the streets when the immediate risk from this first wave of the virus recedes?

Yes. Housing Needs managers lead on the first multi-agency responses to covid setting up partner meetings and a daily information reporting process. This was then built into a governance structure based on the Groundswell planning model and lead passed to the Exeter Homelessness Partnership co-ordinator. Weekly meetings and feedback loops on lead areas of the model have been in place since April involving a range of homelessness sector partners plus public health, various DCC commissioners, local businesses and people with lived experience. ECC leads on accommodation and step-down plans and has set up a system for tracking and reviewing all individuals in emergency accommodation recording critical needs including health and shielding and other primary and secondary care information. This information is shared with partner agencies involved in the delivery of care and support to clients and the planning for transition of key support services for successful move-on. Housing services have sight of the planning proforma (an initial assessment of accommodation and support needs) and are attending a series of co-design meetings in the next 2 weeks to assess feasibility for a bid to capital and revenue funds to be imminently released by Homes England.

- 3 **Councillor K. Mitchell and Councillor M. Mitchell** - Has the City Council issued any guidance to Private sector HMO landlords during the COVID lockdown and what financial and other support linked to the present crisis has been allocated to supporting private sector landlords, HMO properties and PBSA?

Landlords were sent information referring them to government guidance as part of a regular electronic newsletter circulation on 3 May 2020. We are not aware of any specific government COVID 19 funding for private sector landlords, HMO properties

or Purpose Built Student Accommodation. No financial support has been provided to private sector landlords, HMO properties or purpose built student accommodation by Exeter City Council.

- 4 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - Has the City Council had any meetings with the University of Exeter to discuss the safe movements of its students to and from private sector HMOs within communities during the COVID lockdown?

Yes, we regularly meet with university in a variety of multi-agency fora as part of "business as usual". In addition there has been additional joint working as a result of the pandemic. The Emergency Planning structure established through Local Resilience Fora has been in operation and continue to be. Therefore Council officers have been involved in weekly operational meetings throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, of which the University have been an invitee. These meetings form part of the emergency response system and are chaired by senior officers from Devon and Cornwall Police. There are strategic and tactical meetings and the issue of student movements has been noted at the Strategic Command Group with the local operational tactic group having more detailed multi-agency discussions with the university.

- 5 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - Is the Portfolio Holder/Senior Officer aware of the concerns expressed by the Exeter St James Forum regarding concerns about Private HMOs during the COVID lockdown?

Yes senior officers are aware of these concerns, Environmental Health and Community Safety officers continue to investigate noise nuisance complaints when they are reported to the service, in line with normal practice and procedure. It should be noted that the Council does not have any enforcement powers with respect to regulation 6 (Restrictions on Movement) or regulation 7 (Restrictions on gatherings) of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020.

- 6 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - To what extent has the current crisis impacted since March 2020 upon the level of business rate income received by the council and what number of businesses are still making business rate payments?

Below is the comparison between April 2019 and April 2020:

Date	Net collectable debit for the year	% collected	£ collected
April 2019	£83,087,579.43	12.3%	£10,249,328.00
April 2020	£41,274,786.78	11.3%	£4,795,387.82

The net collectable debit has been halved for this year due to the introduction of the Covid-19 Nursery discount (value = £312,202) and Covid-19 Expanded Retail, Leisure & Hospitality Discount (value = £41,875,445). This puts us in a more

favourable position because the costs of those two reliefs are met in full by the government and we also now have far less to collect in year.

The % collection is down 1% in comparison to the same time last year but this will be due to a) not having taken any recovery action yet, and b) to assist businesses, when requested, we deferred the start date of payments for 3 months, therefore those businesses will not start making payments until July.

There are 5,030 properties rated for business rates of which 2,843 receive 100% relief so they have nothing to pay. That leaves 2,187 businesses with business rates to pay however some of those businesses will have less to pay than others through getting some form of relief. For example, there are 230 businesses getting 80% mandatory charitable relief meaning they only have 20% to pay.

Questions from Non-Committee Members

1 **Councillor J. Moore** – After the 'Everyone In' policy in March we saw the housing of people sleeping rough. Were there instances of people presenting as homeless but not meeting the requirements of this policy? No. All persons the service had a reason to believe were homeless (i.e. they had no available accommodation including following any caseworker mediation attempts) were offered accommodation. In particular,

a. How many people presented as homeless after the initial 'Everyone In' period and were they housed?

A total of 376 households have presented to the service since 24th March including those known rough sleepers at the time. Of those 334 had either a relief or prevention duty accepted; the remaining were advice and assistance cases only. All persons who were owed a housing duty were offered housing. Only 1 rough sleeper declined accommodation.

b. How many people who presented as homeless during the period of the lockdown ([from March 24th](#) to date) did the council not offer support to because the council identified that they had no statutory duty or no recourse to public funds. What alternative services were offered to these people?

Of 11 persons with no evident recourse to public funds 7 persons were not accommodated due to either not being habitually resident in the UK or failing to exercise their treaty rights (seeking meaningful employment). Referrals to embassies, Home Office, DCC (in cases of suspected social care need) and offers to repatriate were made in a cases. 4 persons were accommodated under discretionary duty; 2 of whom have moved on positively; 2 remain in ECC accommodation at present.

c. How many people presented as homeless as a result of domestic violence? What safe accommodation/support was offered?

35 households presented since March 24th with domestic abuse listed as the reason for loss of settled home. 22 were accommodated in Council temporary accommodation with support from the accommodation provider and either or both Sanctuary floating support staff and Splitz (commissioned DV support

service) staff. The remaining 13 were either supported into alternative accommodation (friends, family etc.) or supported to return home with safeguarding provisions and other support put in place.

- 2 **Councillor J. Moore** - Councillor Morse has confirmed that when people were moved into hotels they were not made aware that there would be any service charges made to them. What will happen if, having been unaware that they needed to budget for it, homeless people are unable to pay the charge of £21 a week? Will it be accrued as debt?

Service charge arrears are recorded but are not being taken into account for move-on eligibility purposes (i.e. will not act as a barrier to move-on where an option can be found) and will also be written off in terms of debt recovery.

Service charges are a debt to the council and are recoverable. Anyone struggling financially can be assisted through the Exeter Wellbeing Support Fund.

- 3 **Councillor D. Moore** – what long term changes will be made to the Junction to ensure that proper social distancing can be maintained; what provision will there be for people needing to self-isolate because of suspected or actual cases of Covid 19; and, how many people will the Junction accommodate after these changes have been made?

We are still working on options for remodelling the service and preferably to deliver it at more than one location. This would ideally develop the service into a dispersed model whereby specific needs such as gender specific accommodation need could be better addressed. However this will be dependent upon available resource i.e. properties for repurposing / leasing and remodelling of support service. We are working with the provider BCHA assessing current lettings opportunities in the private rented and estates markets and also assessing options for installing self-contained pod accommodation within the Junction premises. We are targeting an increase to 13 spaces asap and increasing to 26+ by 1st October.

Provision for suspected covid cases is relatively well established in that priority testing is being implemented by Public Health Devon at the outset of notification by sector staff. The Clocktower surgery has also been supporting the reporting of cases as well as providing emergency testing. To date there have been approximately 2 dozen suspected client cases across emergency and supported housing over the last 13 weeks and none have resulted in positive tests. Self-isolation for suspected and actual cases is predominantly achievable across the majority of emergency and TA accommodation with the exception of a few rooms in various locations that have shared bathroom and or cooking facilities. The latter has been successfully addressed to date by delivery of food provisions. In the absence of en-suite toilet and bathroom facilities in a few of the accommodations communal management processes have been implemented typically involving cleansing stations, individual towels, regular disinfectant cleaning, and clear protocols for residents and staff. In cases where residents are non-compliant with social distancing and related hygiene measures a series of warnings and behaviour modification agreements are used. There is an outbreak management plan in place across all homelessness accommodation and rough sleeping settings which Public Health Devon is leading on.

Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development and Services – Councillor Wright

Questions from Non-Committee Members

- 1 **Councillor D. Moore** - What assessment of changes of tenants' circumstances will be undertaken to better understand their needs now and enable access to support to manage financial circumstances where COVID 19 has resulted in financial difficulties?

In homelessness settings we have been proactively reviewing the needs assessments of all those persons in emergency covid accommodation. This includes reviewing financial circumstances, income and debt management and involves referrals for specialist support from Homemaker Devon (under sub-contract from CAB) for those who need support to maximise income and minimise debt.

From a Housing Management perspective:

Housing Officers in Tenancy Services carry out regular tenancy property inspections of all tenants. These have been restricted to desktop reviews during the pandemic but as the restrictions are reduced we are working towards returning to visiting the tenants at their homes. These inspections are given a RAG (Red/ Amber/ Green) rating depending on the level of support a tenant might need and their ability to sustain their tenancy. This rating includes financial difficulties and levels of debt owed to the Council. Working with our Payment and Collection and Benefits Team, the Housing Officers are now prioritising contacts to those tenants who are falling into rent arrears. Officers are assessing the financial difficulties tenants might have and either offering them direct support or liaising with officers with specialist knowledge in either debt collection or benefit entitlements.

From a Collection Perspective:

Formal recovery action is currently suspended. Payment & Collection staff are contacting tenants to discuss their rent position (and council tax and/or housing benefit overpayment where applicable). This may lead to helping them make a claim for benefits, signposting them to other agencies for assistance, agreeing realistic/affordable arrangements, or deferring payment whilst they wait for Universal Credit, for instance. This personal contact allows staff to draw on discretionary funds if needed including the Exeter Wellbeing Support Fund. Many customers have been complimentary about this personal touch. On 9 June, 11 staff made 1,200 outbound calls to customers with council tax to pay (including council tenants) but with no entitlement to council tax support and no arrears for previous years. This brought in over £10,000 in payments for the council but also assisted customers from falling into arrears by re-profiling payments or drawing down help from discretionary funds.

- 2 **Councillor D. Moore** - As a consequence of the Covid epidemic has or will the Council review its emergency plan for each Council service?

All services have business continuity plans, which ensure that critical activities have contingency arrangements in place to prepare for and respond to all forms of business disruption. These plans were updated in preparation for the Covid-19 outbreak, they have been updated and reviewed on a regular basis by the Strategic Management Board and they have recently been reviewed in preparation for the easing of lockdown.

To ensure that in the event of a disruptive incident, Exeter City Council:

- responds promptly and efficiently (incident management)
- ensures that critical activities are resumed as quickly as possible and/or continue to be delivered during a disruption. (business continuity)
- focuses initially on those activities that have been identified as a priority in our Business Impact Analysis
- implements contingency arrangements such as moving to a relocation site or identifying alternative working practices i.e. suspending non critical-activities is a key feature of this phase of the response
- returns to 'business as usual' (resumption and recovery)

There is an organisational-wide Emergency Plan, which covers pandemics.