

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date: Thursday 16 July 2020

Time: 5.30 pm

Venue: Legislation has been passed that allows Council's to conduct Committee meetings remotely

Members are invited to attend the above meeting.

If you have an enquiry regarding any items on this agenda, please contact Howard Bassett, Democratic Services Officer (Committees) on 01392 265107.

During the Corona Virus outbreak, meetings will be held by virtual means. The live stream can be viewed here: <https://www.facebook.com/exetercitycouncil/live/%E2%80%99> at the meeting start time.

Membership -

Vizard (Chair), Mitchell, M (Deputy Chair), Begley, Foggin, Mrs Henson, Mitchell, K, Oliver, Pattison, Martin, A, Quance, I, Sheldon, Sparkes, Wardle and Warwick

Agenda

1 Apologies

2 Minutes

(Pages 3 -
14)

To approve and sign the minutes of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 25 June 2020.

3 Declarations of Interest

Councillors are reminded of the need to declare any disclosable pecuniary interests that relate to business on the agenda and which have not already been included in the register of interests, before any discussion takes place on the item. Unless the interest is sensitive, you must also disclose the nature of the interest. In accordance with the Council's Code of Conduct, you must then leave the room and must not participate in any further discussion of the item. Councillors requiring clarification should seek the advice of the Monitoring Officer prior to the day of the meeting.

4 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 - Exclusion of press and Public

It is considered that the Committee would be unlikely to exclude the press and public during the consideration of any of the items on this agenda but, if it should

wish to do so, then the following resolution should be passed:-

“RESOLVED that, under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the particular item(s) of business on the grounds that it (they) involve(s) the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the relevant paragraph(s) of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.”

5 **Questions from the Public Under Standing Order No 19**

For details about how to speak at Committee, please click the following link - <https://exeter.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/councillors-and-meetings/public-speaking-at-meetings/overview/>

Questions must be submitted by 10am three working days before the meeting. For example, if the meeting is being held on a Thursday, questions must be submitted by 10am on the Monday before the meeting, in this case 13 July 2020.

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

(Pages 15
- 28)

Portfolio Holder briefing note attached.

Portfolio Holder for Environment and City Management – Councillor Harvey
Portfolio Holder for Equalities, Diversity and Communities – Councillor Ghusain

Details of questions from Members relating to the two Portfolios above on Covid-19 issues only should be notified to the Corporate Manager Democratic and Civic Support by 10.00am the Monday before the meeting – 13 July 2020.

Date of Next Meeting

To be confirmed

Follow us:

www.twitter.com/ExeterCouncil

www.facebook.com/ExeterCityCouncil

Individual reports on this agenda can be produced in large print on request to Democratic Services (Committees) on 01392 265107.

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, I, Sheldon, Sparkes, Wardle and Warwick

Apologies:

Councillors Begley and Pattison

Also present:

Director (BA), Corporate Manager Democratic and Civic Support, Democratic Services Officer (HB) and Democratic Services Officer (MD)

In attendance:

Councillor Emma Morse
Councillor Laura Wright

- Portfolio Holder for Supporting People
- Portfolio Holder for 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.

Customer Focus Scrutiny

16 July 2020

Environment and City Management COVID-19 response and recovery actions

Introduction

Environment and City Management deliver a large number of the council's front line practical services directly to the public. They are front facing and have regular daily interactions with our communities. Service adaptation in the light of the threat posed by the Coronavirus started before lock down started on 23 March. Our teams were revising business continuity plans, reviewing working practices and preparing with additional equipment at the start of March when the first COVID-19 deaths were confirmed in the UK. At this early stage however the information available in regard to this new threat was understandably thin. As the department is responsible for delivering critical front line service our focus was on business continuity and scenario planning to ensure that we could maintain service provision. For us it was business as usual wherever possible.

1. Initial Operational response and lockdown measures

Section 1 deals with our immediate (and sometimes still ongoing) operational response and actions during lockdown, section 2 deal with the recovery phase.

1.2 Public and Green Spaces

- In line with UK Government Guidance all play areas were closed and secured but parks and open spaces remained open with all general maintenance ongoing.
- Skate Parks at Flowerpots and the Arena were fenced off with temporary fence panels and signs indicating why.
- Public and Green Spaces staff were trained on refuse loading and helped out with bolstering crew numbers due to instances of self-isolating within the refuse crews (in accordance with our business continuity plan). As the self-isolation cases proved to be not COVID-19 numbers eventually stabilised sickness levels still remain low.
- Deep cleans organised in the City Centre while roads and footways were quiet.

1.3 Public Toilets

- All public toilets were temporarily closed to help prevent the spread of the virus, apart from those at the bus station to give some provision for homeless or street attached people.

1.4 Cemeteries

- Additional shoring and excavator drivers trained to prepare for an anticipated increase in demand (which thankfully didn't occur) so we could if required have three or four teams in shifts covering 14 hours a day.
- Louise Harvey joined the Excessive Death Management Team working as part of the Local Resilience Forum emergency response to COVID-19.

1.5 Waterways

- Harbour team using the opportunity to work on water safety critical navigation buoys and actively deterred those seeking to use the waterways recreationally during lockdown.

1.6 Car Parking

- Mary Arches and John Lewis MSCPs were closed. Guildhall and Cathedral and Quay remained open.
- Howell Road, Magdalen Street, Magdalen Road payment machines were bagged off and made available free for key workers in a response to the reduction in public transport.
- Guildhall was made free to enable customers to reach essential food shops in the Guildhall shopping centre such as Sainsbury's.
- Two electric vans and CEO's volunteered for the shielding and community hubs and were involved with delivering food parcels to those at risk.

1.7 CCTV and Homecall

- CCTV and 24/7 emergency response operating as normal
- Telephone welfare checks were organised for all Homecall customers.
- New Homecall installations were suspended due to the need for close 1-2-1 training with the vulnerable person requesting the service. Safe working practices and risk assessments have been developed with the corporate H&S team and new installations can start again shortly.

1.8 Engineering

- Some Engineering staff were furloughed when the job retention scheme was launched but a core element retained to inspect our high risk assets.
- The team took advantage of the closed play parks and refurbished major elements of play equipment in King George V, Anne Close, Haccombe Close, Cowick Barton and St Thomas play areas.
- Used the opportunity while car parks were quiet to carry out various maintenance activities including resurfacing some of our surface car parks, removing potholes, to reduce the risk of trips and falls and to improve their appearance and ease of use for customers.

1.9 Waste Collection and the MRF

Waste Management is one of our critical services and there was a great deal of work done to enable the service to operate as safely as possible. All waste and recycling collections have continued as normal throughout the pandemic. Achieving a social distance of two metres was extremely difficult and numerous changes to working practices were made in consultation with the workforce which included...

- For our operational workforce we implemented appropriate risk control measures recommended by the Waste Industry Safety & Health Forum, including restriction on collection crew size, 'cohorting' of crews to ensure the same people worked together as much as possible, staggering of start times & locations, social distancing at break times, ample supplies of PPE and hand gels & wipes and an instruction in how to use them
- We prioritised the core services of refuse and recycling collection in anticipation of higher staff absence levels, temporarily suspending bulky waste collection and new garden waste subscriptions. This suspension was lifted in April when it became clear we had adequate staff resources
- We used our usual communications channels to encourage residents to carry on recycling as normal. Materials such as glass and garden waste saw increases of 25% in the early weeks
- All collection rounds for refuse, recycling and garden waste were completed on the scheduled day throughout the whole period

1.10 Growth and Commercialisation

- Worked with the business community to signpost businesses to official advice, support and guidance in a time of great uncertainty.

- Set up the Coronavirus business pages on www.exeter.gov.uk with the latest government advice.
- In conjunction with the Business Rates team, the Growth & Commercialisation team set up the Exeter Discretionary Business Grant - £1.4m available for Exeter businesses most affected by Coronavirus
- The Growth & Commercialisation team have weekly meetings with Exeter Chamber, Exeter FSB and InExeter to help address business concerns and challenges.

1.11 Corporate Property and Estates

- Worked with our business tenants on a one to one basis, to offer a tailor made package of measures including deferring rents to ease cash flow, giving them the best opportunity of withstanding the crisis and returning to profitability.
- Rolled this process out to establish a basis for further concessionary terms by negotiation, thereby limiting risk of early business closures
- Kept Exeter Business Centre open for its occupants throughout
- Liaised with building managers to determine a list of assets that would/could be closed and worked with them to manage this process
- Negotiated temporary amendments to maintenance and compliance contracts to minimise expenditure for the council and wasted attendance
- Progressed the Smartgrid and solar field project so as not to lose momentum on this crucial carbon saving project

2. Recovery Phase

Somewhat unusually in emergency planning, the recovery phase is running at the same time as the incident response to Coronavirus, which puts additional strain on our capacity to respond. However teams within Environment and City Management have been leading the recovery phase for the City and proving the link to the County Council Recovery Groups. We have provided lead officers for the ECC City Centre Recovery and the Business Support Groups as well the DCC Recovery Groups such as the Recovery Coordination Group, Business and Economy Recovery Task Group and the Place Sub Group. During the recovery work the teams within Environment and City Management have worked as one to help the City to recover. Another critical activity for all teams was to identify in year savings to balance the loss of income from our revenue generating activities. Activities in this phase include...

- Social distancing measures including signs, floor stencils, banners and one way pedestrian systems installed in our car parks, throughout the main shopping areas of the City Centre and our other district centres.
- Public conveniences reopened at Exeter Quay, Topsham Quay, Heavitree Park and Cowick Barton Playing Fields in addition to the toilets which remained open on Paris Street. These facilities are cleaned every hour with a virucidal cleaner to limit the risk of COVID-19 infection to users and staff.
- Open air tennis courts, basketball courts and skate parks reopened with signage to explain social distancing
- Enhanced cleaning to the City Centre focussing on touch points such as bins and street furniture.
- Established the City Centre Recovery Group – Chair John Laramy from Exeter College – to develop a recovery plan for the city centre to ensure its long term survival and growth
- Established the Exeter Business Support Recovery Group – Chair Matthew Roach from Exeter Airport – to support businesses adapting to the effects of Coronavirus and to address skill / re-training needs for residents

- Continuing to liaise with our business tenants to help them with their recovery plans.
- Establishing a simple, streamlined process for assessing applications for pavement licences for additional tables and chairs as per the Governments temporary legislation. This will assist hospitality businesses to trade while social distancing rules are in place.
- Making sure that corporate buildings which have been closed over the outbreak can be opened safely and with adequate checks and testing. Working with building managers to ensure this process is smooth and as quick as possible.

3. Income

Environment and City Management is one of the largest income generators in the authority but COVID-19 has hit our income streams hard.

- Corporate Property income for the March Quarter dropped by £590,000
- Car parking income dropped by up to 99.1 % throughout April and May and has only just started to rise again. As of the first week in June it has only risen slightly and still represents a drop of 90.3% compared to this time last year.
- Commercial waste income, which dropped to less than half the normal amount in the early weeks, continues to recover steadily at 4-5% per week but is currently 40% lower than before lockdown.

These represent significant values to the authority and income will remain depressed for many months and may never reach previous values. The commercial team are working to replace those lost revenues by replacing customers or with new ventures.

4. Summary

Environment and City Management has managed to continue with the vast majority of its operations as usual. This is all thanks to the dedication of all the staff and their ability to adapt and rise to the challenges posed by Coronavirus. Restoring our income levels will be a challenge and much of this will depend on the success of the recovery plan for the city. Despite the difficulties we face, we continue to serve the residents of the City and help with its recovery and the desire to build back better.

David Bartram

Director

26/06/2020

Portfolio Holders COVID 19 Briefing July 2020

Environmental Health and Community Safety

Overview

This report outlines the key areas that have been the focus of the team service since the coronavirus restrictions were introduced.

Environmental Health and Community Safety covers a wide range of statutory functions including food safety, health and safety, pollution control, licensing, private sector housing, financial assistance, nuisance, public health, anti-social behaviour and community safety. In addition there are a number of corporate policy areas led by the Director that the team support including corporate health and safety, equalities and diversity, safeguarding and emergency planning.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 were enacted on 26 March 2020. Up until the restrictions that this legislation allowed to be brought in by Government the service was operating as normal whilst also finalising the implementation of the 2019 restructure and agreed service improvement plans.

In many ways this service has been on the “front line” of the Council’s COVID 19 response with all staff stepping up to new or increased demands and everyone has performed exceptionally over this period. Senior Officers have been stepping up to support SMB by attending numerous weekly emergency planning session and communicating within and across the system on all manner of issues. The whole team has been affected working in a new and rapidly changing regulatory environment and all staff have risen to the challenge of responding to increasing demands and expectations in the face of restrictions and fast moving regulatory frameworks in almost all areas.

1.Overview

In line with other council department this service responded to Exeter Community Wellbeing: the Council’s COVID-19 community response with staff providing practical help on the hotline and professional advice which included the setting up of the Food Distribution Hub at the Matford Centre; safeguarding and food safety advice for residents and volunteers. At peak demand there were four members of staff providing support to the hub, with two members seconded until Mid-June.

Throughout the lock-down period, for all areas of reactive work there has been added complexity for investigating officers. This is mainly due to the restrictions in place and the fast-changing regulatory environment. This has made investigations across the service more resource intensive in many cases.

Work on the impact of unauthorised traveller encampments was resource intensive until late April when the encampment moved out of the city.

As the pandemic unfolded all departments were required to enact the emergency plan which included updating Business Continuity Plans and, due to the expertise in the team senior managers have assisted SMB in the quality assurance of these Council wider plans. New working arrangements mean that the service is now working with around five officers in the Civic Centre (ad hoc increases subject to specialist or specific needs), with all other officers working from home and available to respond as and when appropriate.

Latterly the team have been pro-active in supporting the Director in developing the new statutory Exeter City Council Covid-19 risk assessments that are being deployed across all service areas. This has been, and continues to be, a significant new area of work for the team as they continue to provide practical advice and support to service leads as they start to adjust to new ways of working as lockdown restrictions change.

The service has been preparing for some time to transfer existing databases (M3 and Lalpac) to the Uniform database as part of the service improvement programme and this work had to continue during the lockdown to ensure critical timescales are met. The transfer is on track for completion by the end of 2020; the final test transfer taking place in mid-August.

Updating of the Enforcement Policy has also taken place, in collaboration with other service leads within the council to expand the revised policy into a 'corporate' enforcement policy. This policy work has to be completed this year and will be finalised shortly and will be considered by members in the autumn.

Recruitment of three Principal Officers has resumed after being put on hold due to the restrictions. Filling these posts will complete the restructure of the service undertaken by the Director.

2. Community Protection

Community protection includes: private sector housing; financial assistance and residential nuisance. COVID restrictions saw the introduction of new safe working practices for dealing with complaints and undertaking inspections. Our approach has been continually updated throughout the restrictions to reflect the ever-changing situation and inevitable adjustments to government guidance.

Throughout the period, staff have continued to undertake inspections where appropriate and safe to do so. ***The work rate has increased across this area of the service, with a 163% increase in Private Sector Housing work, 161% increase in Disabled Facilities Grant approvals and 194% increase in neighbourhood nuisance (mainly around noise nuisance).***

Private Sector Housing team have started to undertake proactive work to address the backlog of licenced House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) inspections. In addition, in mid-June we re-introduced the installation of indoor monitoring equipment for noise nuisance.

Preparations continue to ensure that the service continues to adapt to the changed and changing environment, this has included: updating the Financial Assistance Policy; reviewing procedures across all areas of work and creating new procedures to deal with expected rises in work as restrictions are eased.

3. Safety, Health and Licensing

The focus in this area has been on providing information and advice to local businesses in the context of the shifting environment of legislation and guidance. Whilst most businesses were responsible in their approach, implementing new systems to control risk, there has been an element of regulatory and enforcement work required. Business Regulation and Licensing team are now involved with online training for the business community to assist them back to work.

The Licensing Team have continued to issue licence applications and renewals, and following changes in legislation, have been able to hold remote committee hearings. Assisting with small business grants and providing advice to taxi operators to help them continue to operate, the Team continue to look at ways of facilitating businesses and minimising the impact of deregulation in licensing legislation.

The Annual Status Report (air quality) template has now been released from Defra so work has started on this. Work has also been done with the large building sites following the announcement of extended working hours, to minimise potential environmental and nuisance issues.

Whilst work has been impacted by the demands of the reactive Covid-related work, the routine work to deliver the health and safety workplace transport initiative required by the HSE, programme of food inspections and Pollution, Prevention and Control (regulatory processes for crematoria rendering plant, metal finishing and petrol stations) inspections will need to be caught up later in the year. Planning has taken place to ensure that we can continue to meet regulatory requirements..

Lockdown has seen an increase in demand for Pest Control, and staff have provided essential services to residents throughout this period.

4. Corporate Work Areas

Continued support is being provided across the council on a number of areas. The service has been at the forefront of providing advice, guidance and clear direction with respect to covid-19 health and safety throughout the pandemic. This has included responding at very short notice to government guidance to ensure that service operations are able to continue in a safe manner. Covid-19 specific risk assessments have been drawn up for offices, visiting officers, outdoor workers and the materials reclamation facility with an additional risk assessment at an advanced stage regarding customer facing and visitor attractions. A Council track and trace system has also been developed to deal with suspected or confirmed covid-19 cases.

Safeguarding work has also continued with work being conducted to devise an e-learning safeguarding and domestic violence training package, reviewing the council's safeguarding policy which will be presented to Executive and Council later in the year and participating in multi-agency safeguarding meetings. The Equalities and Diversity policy has also been revised with a view to presenting to Executive and Council later in the year. In addition input has been given to a number of Equalities Impact Assessments relating to forthcoming reports including the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan, Financial Assistance Policy and Corporate Enforcement Policy.

It has been important throughout the last 3 months for the service to support a strong Community Safety Partnership and ensure that work of the partnership continues. The service has worked on a multi-agency basis to monitor key community safety data in the city which has included hate crime, domestic and sexual violence and abuse and anti-social behaviour. In response to such trends being identified, work has been conducted with partners on a campaign to provide signposting to domestic violence victims in supermarkets and pharmacies as lockdown means these venues might be the only place victims are able to access and work on accommodation for domestic violence victims.

A large amount of work has gone into preparing for the opening of pubs on 4 July 2020. This has included multi-agency planning around resources, discussions with licensed premises regarding operating models and minimising Anti-Social Behaviour, making arrangements for the deployment of taxi marshals and the opening of the Helpzone and scoping work in preparation to make a bid to the Police and Crime Commissioner for funding to tackle Anti-Social Behaviour at the Quay and in the City Centre.

What's next?

During this period, while reactive workloads have increased in some areas of the service, they have decreased in others. The multidisciplinary nature of Environmental Health Officers and Technicians has meant that officers have been able to focus their resources onto those areas needing it most.

Across the service, the opportunity to update policies, procedures and plans has also been taken. This has involved planning for work in the 'new normal' that will persist for some time as well as preparing for the need to assist Public Health colleagues should outbreaks in Exeter occur.

With this in mind, work has been undertaken and is on-going around managing the easing of restrictions around work and the lockdown; both from an internal Exeter City Council perspective and an external regulatory perspective. This latter point is likely to form a large body of work for the Environmental Health and Community Safety service going forward.

This page is intentionally left blank

Portfolio Holders COVID 19 Briefing July 2020
Community Grants and Community Development

Exeter Community Wellbeing

Exeter City Council and Wellbeing Exeter have been working together to provide practical help and support for local people to get through the coronavirus pandemic. We set up **Exeter Community Wellbeing** to assist individuals and community groups to help and support each other at this challenging time.

The service has made over 2,875 connections through the hotline with many more at neighbourhood level. Tens of thousands of leaflets have gone through doors, frequent shout outs on the radio, social media and in the local news as well as sharing of the helpline details across GP practices, local groups, not for profits and volunteer networks, have all contributed to making sure everyone gets access to the right support.

The council hotline team have dealt with a wide range of calls from local residents who are on the NHS Shielding List, members of family calling from across the UK worried about parents, relatives & individuals that want to volunteer. Calls have ranged from individuals needing food, medication, issues with housing & amenities so not only have the team having to liaise and refer to our fantastic Wellbeing Exeter and the Exeter Community Team working behind the scenes but also liaising with departments within our own & other local councils.

Whilst our offer is a “light touch match-making service” and we are not sending volunteers into people’s homes, we have been very mindful about personal safety issues for everyone involved. We have put together a range of guides and top tips for volunteers and groups to cover key safeguarding issues including: handling money for shopping; making safe deliveries; first aid responses; social distancing etc. We also built a rota of liveried delivery vehicles (ours and partners) to provide added reassurance to the most vulnerable people living alone to help them feel as safe and secure as we can.

We have heard astonishing stories through the Exeter Community Wellbeing network which we have been sharing in weekly blogs and through our social media outlets. Our Wellbeing Exeter Community Builders continue to support local networks in their endeavours to help each other.

The **Wellbeing Support Fund**, which aims to help individuals who find themselves in financial difficulty due to the Coronavirus outbreak and can’t access funds through other initiatives, has now dealt with 174 cases with the majority being directed to existing support within council (e.g. council tax, benefits, and food bank vouchers). 60 awards have been made totalling around £7,000. The scheme is funded by Devon County Council, you can learn more about it on the Council website. The majority of financial hardship requests are for help with utility bills, white goods repairs and rent arrears. We are able to support the majority of people with help with food through the Food Bank and/or local larder schemes as well as a voucher scheme we have negotiated with supermarkets. We also have a voucher scheme for emergency white good replacements such as washing machines and fridges.

During peak times we were taking between 70 and 80 calls a day on the hot line and Council staff were re-deployed from non-essential services to manage the phone lines

and they have (and continue to do) an amazing job responding to a wide variety of needs and concerns. On top of the incoming calls the team have also been undertaking daily outbound calls to people whose details come through from central government, the NHS and Devon County Council through the **NHS Shielding Programme**.

There are around 3,728 people in the NHS Shielding scheme in Exeter with 840 in receipt of weekly food parcels. As the national programme is tapering off we have been assisting vulnerable people to find sustainable solutions to access delivery of food including access to 900 priority shopping slots we have negotiated with local supermarkets.

We have now fully integrated the Exeter Community Wellbeing helpline into the Customer Contact Centre and this is now operating as “business as usual” taking between 5-10 calls a day with call handlers now trained up to cover the community issues from COVID. We can scale this up by re-deploying other staff into the team should the need arise.

There continues to be weekly updates between the teams involved in Exeter Community Wellbeing which includes Wellbeing Exeter partner agencies, City Community Trust and the city council.

Households across Exeter that are on the NHS Shielded group will have received a letter from Government to let them know that the support will stop in terms of free food parcels by the end of July. We will be writing to these residents to let them know that there will be ongoing support available through the city council and Exeter Community Wellbeing service

We will continue to offer a range of practical help for people who are on the **NHS Shielded List**, people living alone and self-isolating, or those caring for someone and needing a bit of help and support whilst self-isolating. We can continue to offer help with an introduction to local neighbourhood or community group for support with things like:

- Collecting food and essential items such as prescriptions
- A conversation if you feel lonely or isolated
- Help for new customers to register for priority supermarket slots
- Referrals to Exeter Foodbank for urgent food supplies for those in need
- Small one-off grants for immediate short term help for people in urgent need with little or no access to money as a result of the pandemic
- Signposting to Government and NHS coronavirus advice and guidance
- Support to look after or improve health and wellbeing

Exeter Connect

Exeter Community Initiatives were awarded the contract to run the new Voluntary Sector Support Service for Exeter in December 2019. The service is now called ‘Exeter Connect’

- 2 Service Managers (job-share) started in post at the start of April 2020 (lockdown started 23 March). Plans to recruit two development workers were on hold during the COVID period: plans are now underway to start recruitment in the next few weeks.
- Exeter Connect will provide free, independent and professional practical support to existing and new community organisations in the city and help groups develop and become self-sustaining. The service will promote improved inclusivity and community connectivity across the city.
- Exeter Connect have supported the Exeter Community Wellbeing work over the past few months helping in the matching of volunteers to COVID community

response groups (Local Area Teams), and helping to provide support for groups. Specific projects to support the COVID response including:

- Updating the Volunteer Information Pack produced through Exeter Community Wellbeing. This has been given to individuals and Local Area Teams which gives clear guidance on a range of issues for group co-ordinators including safeguarding. These packs have been well received and will continue to be developed.
- Co-ordinating individual Local Area Team reports which include data on activity, successes and celebrating innovation, challenges and unforeseen issues.
- Facilitating discussions on the future of the Local Area Teams with the recognition there is the potential of a 'second wave' of COVID-19 later in the year.

As the contract develops Exeter Connect will have a key role in providing information and advice to community groups on where and how to access funds and how to fund raise: this is a critical part of their role in enabling group's to become sustainable. They can also offer to 'hold' funding for community groups that are in their early stages of development and don't as yet have their own bank account. They can offer this on a case by case basis going forward.

Plans to launch Exeter Connect will focus on celebrating the work of the informal local area teams, promoting the positive message of community connection. This will be a way to introduce Exeter Connect and the mission to support local VCSE organisations become self-sustaining. The website and branding is currently under development.

Citizen Advice Exeter

Citizen Advice Exeter were appointed by the Council in October 2019 to provide a city wide Independent Information Advice and Advocacy Service. The purpose of the service is to:

- Ensure free, independent, confidential and impartial advice, information and advocacy is available to help people resolve the problems they face.
- Help address the widening inequality gap for Exeter communities in terms of health, income, employment and access to services
- Work alongside the Council's Housing Needs Team to support customers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and are experiencing financial and budgeting difficulties

Since October Citizen Advice Exeter have been providing these services from their offices behind the civic centre. Since the start of COVID they have re-established their service on line and by phone with staff and volunteers working from their own homes.

Advice Trends April 2019 – March 2020

Client enquiries: Helped 11,324 clients directly with their advice and information needs. Welfare benefits Overall, there has been a 27.6% increase in welfare benefit enquiries.

The main changes being:

- 27.6% increase about attendance allowance
- 22.8% increase about council tax benefit/local support
- 14.8% increase about DLA/Personal Independence Allowance
- Also dealt with 4,164 new enquires about Universal Credit.

Debt: There has been 6% increase in debt enquiries. The main changes being:

- 27.2% increase about private rent arrears
- 22.8% increase about fuel debt

Employment: There has been a 4.7% decrease in employment enquiries. The main changes being:

- 28.9% decrease about self-employment
- 9.7% decrease about pay and entitlements
- 1% decrease about dispute resolution

Housing: There has been a 13.7% increase in housing enquiries. The main changes being:

- 57.5% increase about threatened homelessness
- 19.7% increase about owner occupier property
- 14.3% increase about actual homelessness

Ward profiles of the data are available

Future Plans:

- Training for Well Being Exeter Community Enablers and Connectors: CAB are exploring delivering 'modular' on-line style training – 1hr bite size training sessions to 4 – 6 individuals
- Promotional Events / Pop up Information and Advice Session: Potential venues have been identified in the wards with the highest levels of inequalities, to hold 'clinics'. Due to COVID19 Citizen Advice have been unable to continue with this style of promotional work but a significant promotion of on line resources have been taking place via social media platforms.
- Working in Partnership with AGE UK: plans to support AGE UK at their monthly coffee morning in St Stephen's Church on Exeter High Street been postponed due to COVID19 and social distancing regulations. There are plans to do some joint working around Scams Awareness later in the year.

The contract includes a requirement for the CAB Court team to identify clients who are at risk of homelessness and refer them to the Council to offer support to prevent this. Referral systems are being reviewed due to COVID restrictions. Citizen Advice have taken part in the Exeter Community Wellbeing partnership response to COVID. It has been really valuable to have a close working relationship, so that call handlers can make quick referrals for people who could benefit from financial help and support.

COVID-19 Community Grants Fund

The Exeter COVID-19 Community Action Fund was set up at the outset of the COVID pandemic to help community groups and organisations as they step up to help those people most affected by the pandemic. The fund is supported by Exeter City Council and a generous £100,000 contribution from the Exeter Chiefs Foundation.

The initial fund offered up to £3,000 to community organisations who were facing a loss of income. The Governments Business Grant became available in May at which point the £3,000 grant was stopped. The Fund is still open to support groups and organisations with a one-off grant of up to £1,000 to support projects for community led activities that will:

- meet urgent needs within the community
- cover transport costs for getting vital supplies to people isolated at home
- help people to stay connected and informed
- help people maintain and support mental health and wellbeing

To date £107,509 has been awarded to 70 applicants (24 refused)

This page is intentionally left blank