

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

5 October 2023

Present:

Councillor Matthew Vizard (Chair)

Councillors Rees, Begley, Fullam, Hannaford, Holland, Miller, Patrick, Sparling, Wardle and Warwick

Apologies:

Councillors Atkinson, Ellis-Jones and Harvey

Also present:

Director Net Zero Exeter & City Management, Service Lead Housing Needs & Homelessness and Democratic Services Officer (HB)

In attendance:

Councillor Denning	Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development and Support Services
Councillor Pearce	Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homelessness Prevention
Councillor Williams	Portfolio Holder for Place and City Management
Councillor Foale	Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Democratic Services and Environmental Health

24 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 29 June 2023 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

25 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

26 Questions from the Public under Standing Order No. 19

No questions from members of the public were received.

27 Questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order No 20

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20, the questions below to the Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development and Support Services - Councillor Denning, the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homelessness Prevention - Councillor Pearce and the Portfolio Holder for Place and City Management - Councillor Williams, had been submitted by Councillors Atkinson, Moore, Miller and Rees and had been circulated in advance to Members of the Committee. In the absence of Councillor Atkinson, her questions were read out by the Chair. The responses of the Portfolio Holders are set out in italics.

Question to the Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development and Support Services - Councillor Denning

Councillor Atkinson

In July 2023, the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 became law. This Act updates the Regulator of Social Housing's responsibilities and powers. Presently the Regulator can only investigate landlords such as the City Council when someone refers a complaint that passes a threshold that the conduct complained of "seriously harms (or could seriously harm) tenants."

The Act means that, starting in April 2024, the Regulator can more routinely and proactively, take action in a wider range of circumstances under the consumer standards.

Proposals for amending the standards registered providers must meet so tenants live in safe, quality homes, have choice and protection, and can hold landlords to account are currently being consulted. This consultation closes at 6:00pm on 17 October 2023.

Has the City Council responded to the consultation and what is our view about whether the proposed new standard will improve healthy living in Exeter's Council Homes?

Has the Regulator investigated a complaint that a landlord has breached the consumer regulation requirement that the conduct harms or could seriously harm tenants?

Response

The Council housing team are aware of the consultation from the Regulator for Social Housing and have been preparing a response to the consultation which has yet to be completed and agreed. As stated this consultation has to be submitted by the 17 October and will be agreed by the Portfolio Holder before being dispatched.

The regulation is welcome by the Council as it will ensure all social landlords in the city have a clear set of standards which they must comply with in a number of areas including complaints and the quality of homes. With regards to the council housing the Council has a fully costed Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan which includes works and maintenance in relation to health and safety and compliance priorities. These standards are already part of our programme and service delivery and will be continually monitored to ensure we comply in all areas.

The Regulator has not investigated any complaints in relation to the consumer standard for the housing service and their main powers in relation to Local Authorities with retained stock come into power in April 2024.

In the period leading up to the new regulation the housing team are working on a review to ensure full compliance with the new consumer standards which will be considered by the Council Housing and Development Advisory Board once completed.

From Councillor Moore

The all parliamentary group for Council Housing is conducting an Inquiry and is looking for views on some or all of the following:-

- How important is council housing in addressing local/general housing need?;
- Does your area still have directly-own council housing? If not, do you think new/acquired council homes are needed? Please say why?;
- If your area has council housing, what condition is it in, what investment is needed, and what is stopping that investment?;
- What is your experience of stock transfer, Private Finance Initiative (PFI), Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO), Special Purchase Vehicle (SPV)s or other alternative mechanisms to build and manage council (or former council) housing?; and
- What do you think we need to do to secure a new generation of good-quality council homes?

Would the Portfolio Holder consider coordinating a response on behalf of the Council by the deadline?

Response

The following is the response the Council gave to the Inquiry.

Re: All-Parliamentary Group for Council Housing

Thank you for your correspondence asking for our views in relation to Council Housing which we welcome the opportunity to provide.

Exeter City Council is proud to have retained the council housing stock with approximately 4,800 homes provided at a social rent. As the largest social landlord in the city we believe it has a critical role in the provision of affordable housing to its residents. Council housing makes up 10% of the homes in the city and therefore also plays a key role in delivering great neighbourhoods and communities for residents to live in.

In terms of the stock condition of the Council's properties, we have a costed Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan and will seek to address all maintenance priorities during that period. This will include an ambitious retrofit programme which, to date, has seen us complete full retrofit works to over 700 properties and a resulting carbon reduction of the properties and energy efficiencies of between 40% and 60% for the respective tenants. Given our dependence upon rental income for delivering our service, and the fact that our costs are generally driven by a CPI increase, there has to be a close link between the two. Where there is a gap, as in the rent cap this year that gives us an ongoing shortfall and reduces the base figure that we apply future a percentage increases to.

In order to demonstrate how important council housing is in addressing local general housing need we would offer the following local information:

- *According to our housing needs survey (2020) the average house price in Exeter is £249,000*
- *The ratio of income to house prices for lower quartile incomes and lower quartile house prices in Exeter is 9.27 (i.e. to buy a house a lower quartile home requires almost 10 times the average gross annual wages).*

- The median monthly private sector rent is £802 (higher than the rest of the south west). The highest monthly social rent in Exeter is £326.
- The median incomes in Exeter are £29,749
- Based on 25% of income being for renting and 3.5 x income multiple for buying the income required to access different tenures is as follows
 - Social rent £15,648
 - Affordable rent £29,040
 - Market rent £38,496
 - Market sale (10% deposit) £64,029
 - Shared ownership (50%) £47,389
- There are over 2,600 applicants on the housing register (which is a Devon-wide choice based letting scheme).
- Approximately 500 properties become available to let each year of which over 320 are from the council's own stock.
- Of the properties let over 30% were allocated to homeless applicants.

In order to deliver a new generation of good quality council homes we believe that there needs to be an ambitious build programme across all tenures that will allow for all tenures to be grown.

Exeter has an ambitious Council own build programme to deliver 500 new homes by 2030. This programme focusses on brownfield regeneration of sites in the Councils ownership, including garage sites and the regeneration of non-traditional stock. This brownfield regeneration approach comes with the additional costs associated with this type of development; demolition and associated asbestos removals; services redirections; land contamination; substation requirements; water attenuation; and existing tenant decants/home loss payments. This makes the development of these types of sites considerably more expensive than greenfield development, and coupled with material and labour cost increases across the industry the viability to deliver this much needed housing is very challenging.

Grant availability does assist (Homes England and Brownfield Land Release Fund), but does not by itself make these sites viable or deliverable. The biggest challenge to the viability of these schemes is the current interest rates, if the government's interest rates for borrowing were reduced this would ensure that these sites were viable again and would facilitate the delivery of these schemes.

Whilst we welcome the introduction of greater regulation in the sector to ensure quality, safe services and homes are provided to tenants this has brought with it additional costs implication that will impact on our ability to build additional homes. For example the regulator has just advised us that there will be a fee payable for their services which will equate to £35,000 to £40,000 of additional money being taken out of our new build or planned works budgets. We are also considering our resourcing levels in order to ensure we meet the regulatory requires which may adversely impact on our ability to deliver on other projects.

Whilst you have not asked the specific question we welcomed the self-financing changes at the time of introduction and do believe it is a fairer system than previously used. However it was significantly hampered by the introduction of the 5 year 1% rent reduction at the same time which impacted significantly on our HRA business plan anticipated income levels.

I hope this information is useful and if you require more information or detail from Exeter City Council we would be happy to assist with the final report or hosting an event in the south west.

Councillor Denning advised that a date was being arranged for representative of the All Party Parliamentary Group to meet locally with tenants.

Supplementary question and answer.

Do rent levels match the Council's policy on convergence rent levels and do funds from Right To Buy contribute to wider Council housing policies.

Answer

A written answer will be provided on statistics relating to convergence rent levels. Whilst there are commendable aspects to Right To Buy, the Council loses some 40 properties a year, effectively losing as many as can be built.

Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee agreed that a further submission be made to the Inquiry on the points raised from the supplementary questions.

Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homelessness Prevention - Councillor Pearce

From Councillor Atkinson

Local authorities like Exeter in England do not have a duty to secure accommodation for all homeless people.

Rough sleepers are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Studies have found strong correlations between homelessness and a multiplicity, and increased severity, of both physical and mental health conditions.

Despite the Government's [Housing First](#) strategy and present 2022 Ending Rough Sleeping for Good policy to end Rough Sleeping by 2024, the incidents of rough sleeping seems to be increasing.

How effective does the Portfolio Holder believe this strategy and support for Councils is in meeting this target. What needs to change?

Response

Whilst both of the cited strategies have undoubtedly promoted positive changes in practice towards supporting rough sleepers to come off the streets they ultimately have limited reach in light of wider issues such as underperforming house-building targets and the steady erosion of health and social care services. The ongoing cost of living pressures including record rising rent levels is registering a significant impact on affordability of homes, especially for lower income households including single person renters and those on benefits.

The HF and ERS strategies have been backed by funding to help Councils and local areas to add much needed capacity in terms of units of accommodation dedicated for homelessness including emergency "off-the-streets" accommodation for rough sleepers through the RSI initiative. Resettlement capacity has also been boosted by the Next Steps and Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme funding streams. However in many areas these recent additions to the local area supported accommodation for rough sleepers has only partially replaced the supported

accommodation units lost over the last 13 years following the wind-down of the national Supporting People programme.

In terms of change some of the key significant factors could include changing the Local Housing Allowance rates, i.e. the rate of housing benefit assistance for households on lower incomes. The current rates paid to either UC or HB claimants remain set on the lower quartile of the local average rent figure which means for most claimants there is a significant and growing "top-up" required to be paid from personal benefits income. For example a person aged 25+ renting a room in a shared house in Exeter will typically need to find a weekly top-up of £45 from a personal benefit of £85. When adding significantly increased utility bills this leaves basically no disposable income for food and other essentials.

Arguably a major investment in social housing development is also needed in order to provide more affordable housing to help meet the growing waiting lists whilst also preserving the current capacity from continual erosion due to policies such as right to buy. An equally significant level of investment in early help, family mediation, social care and child-to-adult transition services would conceivably help support a reduction in future risk of homelessness as would investment in accommodation step-down services from institutions such as prisons and offender institutions, hospitals and mental health institutions.

A further point of change, as recommended following last year's local homelessness scrutiny assessment, is for homelessness funding to be less short-term (typically 3 year funding cycles or less). Longer term funding packages to housing authorities, registered social landlords and third sector housing and support agencies would arguably drive better investment into the provision of dedicated and specialist housing and tenancy-related support services for homeless people including rough sleepers.

From Councillor Moore

Please can the Portfolio Holder set out how the Council's homeless support service reviews and responds to Inquest findings of people who have died while rough sleeping or while in the care of any service in the city offering support to people who are homeless? Please can examples of any changes as a result be given?

Please can someone give me a ring about the Healthy Homes email - I am not clear about the request.

The Director subsequently contacted the Councillor.

Response

The Council reports all deaths in service (including street-based) to Public Health (Devon); the details of which are databased and assessed when Public Health and the Devon County Council Safeguarding assess fatalities and incidents (including suicides and near misses) for serious case review purposes. The City Council actively takes a prevention role for high risk cases by holding multi-agency meetings with providers and Devon County Council. The work is to set up support and engagement pathways for people who are most at risk, often from near miss overdoses, and to put appropriate service interventions in place to address associated problems and to engage with addiction and or therapy services. Public Health (Devon) has recently devised and implemented a suicide prevention model policy and approach with city and countywide partner agencies.

The Council's Housing Needs and Homelessness service also has its own death in accommodation policy and procedures which incorporates review of each case/serious incident including a multi-agency approach to review and learning points. Although the statutory responsibility does not sit with the City Council, it remains the Council's ambition to work with statutory and voluntary partners to better formally review preventable deaths, The Council is continuing conversations with Devon County Council and Adult Safeguarding to agree on a way forward via advocating formal serious case reviews in homelessness. There have been no serious case reviews in homelessness as the details are normally assessed by the Coroner's office. To date, no practice changes have been identified or recommended as services have been able to demonstrate clear understanding of risk, recording of reasonable interventions (given available resource capacity in the sector) and application of due diligence in their respective duty of care for individuals.

Supplementary question and answer.

Has there been a review of Inquiry findings of any specific cases of individuals dying as a result of rough sleeping?

Answer

The Council works closely with Devon County Council, Adult Safeguarding and the Coroner's Office and information can be provided if notified of the detail of any specific case.

Question to the Portfolio Holder for Place and City Management - Councillor Williams

Councillor Atkinson

The Government said it plans to make it mandatory for local authorities to collect dry mixed recycling segregated by household. Is this still being progressed?

Has it published a monetised costs of "main affected group"? Such as the costs of transition ongoing costs to households and businesses of sorting waste for new collection requirements and the wider impacts on the recycling and waste industry?

Response

The Government consultation on 'Consistency in Household and Business Recycling in England' finished in June 2021. This followed on from an earlier consultation in 2019. The results of this, together with a number of related waste consultations, including a deposit return scheme and a producer responsibility scheme, have not been published or their implementation has consistently been pushed back.

Whilst this consultation did not specify how recycling would be collected from residents, it did indicate that food waste collection would eventually be mandatory. Recent announcements by the Government indicate that no direct announcement on statutory guidance for any of the revised waste proposals, or how they are to be funded, will be released anytime soon. Concerns regarding the delays were also expressed at a meeting of the Devon Authorities Strategic Waste Committee.

Councillor Moore

How long is the average current waiting time for residents to receive new bins, including garden waste, and what has the trend been over the last six months?

Since January 2023 the Council has experienced exceptionally high demand with respect to bin deliveries as a result of new housing developments being occupied and the roll out of food waste in parts of the city. In total, the Council has delivered 35,513 waste receptacles to households which include 32,672 food waste caddies. At present, the Council is seeing a three to four week delivery time for new bins, with this being up to eight weeks on a Monday due to the level of new build properties in this delivery day area. Whilst additional resource has been allocated with additional Saturdays worked to bring delivery times down, demand is higher than resource capacity at present.

Supplementary question and answer.

When will the request for new bins be met?

Answer

As soon as possible, subject to available resources, sickness etc.

What is the current level of reports and complainants, and the service performance trends over the last six months for each of the following areas:-

- Assisted bin service. The Council has conducted 3,283 assisted waste collections per week. Since January 2023 there have been 552 reports of missed collections (excluding food) out of the 128,037 scheduled collections which equate to 0.43% of the overall collection rate;
- Food waste collections The Council is currently conducting 21,000 food collections per week and had 1,598 reports of missed collections since January 2023;
- New bins, including garden waste – since January 2023, the Council had 762 enquiries from customers regarding their bin delivery order and;
- The collection of sharps – since January 2023, the Council had 792 enquiries from customers regarding their sharps collection. It must be noted that doorstep sharps collections are a discretionary service provided by the Council which is not provided by all Council's nationally.

Supplementary questions and answers.

Is the Council prioritising the collection of missed assisted bin collections?

Can bin stickers be provided on what can and cannot be disposed?

What is the average length of time to respond to requests for removal of sharps?

Answer

There are occasions when residents miscalculate the collection times of assisted bins and other times where crews make mistakes but all incidents are individually investigated and resolved.

Residents were notified when the new food waste collections service was introduced for their area and advised on the appropriate disposal of waste. Information is also available on the Council's website.

A written response will be provided in respect of sharps.

Bromhams Field re-establishment - please outline the problems with the topsoil and other issues that has led to the long delays to the re-establishment of Bromhams Field and how much has this cost the Council?

At the end of the Environment Agency (EA) flood alleviation works the EA contractors failed to reinstate the Bromhams pitches to playing field standards, as per its former status. The initial delay to the progression of investigations and works was as a result of the EA considering undertaking the work in house. Subsequently the EA agreed to fund the works but for the City Council to manage and deliver the project to its satisfaction. The main issues identified with the topsoil were as follows;

*Natural debris (stones and rocks);
Soil compaction;
Undulating terrain;
Inappropriate vegetation; and
Poor drainage.*

As a result, a remedial works package was agreed with a view to removing the topsoil, screening it, burying/sorting any stones, and re-establishing the topsoil with appropriately designed drainage and gradients. Additional clean topsoil, seeding, and fertilisation will then be used to ensure the site meets a minimum playing field quality. The EA is funding the remedial works at Bromhams fields with no current financial impact to the City Council.

Supplementary question and answer.

When will the reinstatement works commence?

Answer

A written answer will be provided.

Post meeting Note : The answer to the supplementary question regarding the time scale for Bromhams Field was already included in the Portfolio Holder's report on Page 17 item 3 where it states "Public and Green Space anticipates the contract for works will be awarded mid to late January 2024. Operations permitting, site development will take place from Spring 2024 with an anticipated opening date Spring/Summer 2025 subject to change.

Rougemont footpath: does this work include reopening the gate in the City wall between the two parks?

Response

The Rougemont footpath works, once complete, will allow residents and visitors to move freely between Northernhay and Rougemont Gardens. This however, will be through the tower access route not the lower archway. The Archway repairs continue to be investigated by the City Council's Heritage Officer and the Corporate Property team, and will take place at a later date when funding and resources allow.

Supplementary question and answer.

Has the investigation been completed and when will the works commence?

Answer

The Corporate Property Team and the Council's Heritage Officer have completed the investigation and are considering solutions in light of the quotes for the repair works on other sections of the city wall, vastly exceeding available funding.

Councillor Miller

In your report you mention that over the summer there has been a difficulty in releasing members of the grass team to carry out other work across the city such as maintaining shrubbery. Please can you go into a bit more detail about whether this has impacted any particular areas of the city, and how this compares to last year?

Historically we have a dry summer period which considerably slows grass growth and allows grass cutting staff to be diverted onto other activities. For the last two years, the warm, wet conditions have extended the grass season over the full course of the spring and summer period. This prevented grass teams being diverted onto those alternative activities such as shrub maintenance for six weeks mid-season. The impacts for the last two years had been the same and would have been noticeable city wide as shrubs became encased in bindweed and other growth, starting to encroach onto footways. The lack of resource meant that rather than a proactive programme of maintenance, the Council was forced to take a reactive approach, and only maintain beds where encroachment compromised access or safety.

The service establishment is fixed year round, based on the ability to offset operations seasonally i.e. shrubs/hedges are usually maintained over winter and grass is spring/summer work. Every year, operational teams take on two additional staff to inflate resource over the spring/summer to meet peak demand, however this additional resource is not enough if the Council can-not release the grass teams during the season. Should these weather patterns continue the Council will be forced to take on additional summer/spring resources to meet demand?

You mention in your report a struggle to recruit waste delivery drivers, and that you and the team have taken steps to address this. Please can you go into a bit more detail about what you see as the causes of this, and whether there is anything more as a Council we can be doing?

Over the last two years there has been a national shortage of Large Goods Vehicle (LGV) drivers which has impacted not only local authorities but also the private sector. As a result of this shortage, the private sector offered lucrative hourly rates which local authorities were unable to match. This resulted in qualified drivers leaving for better pay settlements. In addition, locally the Council has a very loyal but aging workforce. A number of drivers reached retirement age and are now happily enjoying their retirement. This led to a perfect storm which meant that the Council struggled for a period of time to recruit. However a development pathway was set up for staff, which, whilst was not an instant fix led to the Council developing members of the loyal workforce becoming drivers and thus creating a more long term sustainable solution to the workforce programme. This resulted in seven staff becoming drivers with a further two currently undertaking the training. In addition, over the last few weeks, recruitment agencies are reporting an increased amount of driver availability looking for work.

The Council has also struggled recently with the recruitment of loaders and MRF operatives. It is hoped that this is just a seasonal issue due to high vacancies in other sectors over the summer months, but should this not improve it will cause operational

issues. The Council regularly undertakes recruitment drives to fulfil positions that become vacant but this can be difficult finding the right person for the role.

Supplementary question and answer.

Is there potential within existing budgets to recruit additional drivers?

Answer

Recruitment would need to be considered in light of the ongoing cuts to services required as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan. The Cleansing team is very resourceful in identifying solutions to this problem.

The Portfolio Holder congratulated the Service Manager Public and Green Space and team for the progress made on the internal development programme giving staff within the service the opportunity to qualify as drivers.

Councillor Rees

1. What are the City Council plans for reducing our reliance on temporary and agency staff?

Over the last 12 months we have been reducing the Council's reliance on temporary and agency staff. This has been achieved through the adoption of a career progression pathway where loaders and MRF operative have been given the opportunity to progress onto driver training and roles. This has helped ease the issues with respect to driver recruitment which has enable the service to deliver all doorstep collection services over the last 12 months as planned. However, we do regular recruitment drives when staff leave the service. The service still requires the use of agency staff to fill for unexpected absence and vacancies to maintain service delivery, which is factored into the service budget.

Supplementary question and answer.

What lessons can be learnt from other authorities to reduce reliance on agency staff?

Answer

The team examines how other organisations retain staff. Although the private sector can offer higher wages, the remuneration relates to longer working hours. The latest pay award will assist in staff retention.

2. How much money is required for the Canal Gate and bank repairs?

The Exeter Canal was the first canal to be built in the UK since Roman times and therefore requires a great deal of ongoing maintenance and inspection. Estimates are being worked up at the moment for the more urgent works and those of a health and safety related nature. These are likely to be all that we can afford with the current financial pressures.

3. You mention teething problems with the initial food waste collection, which is to be expected. Please could you summarise the key learning from this initial phase, and how this will help to shape the future roll out.

Unfortunately whilst the Council was able to expand food waste roll out during the course of the year, new staff delivering the service coupled with unexpected

absences meant that we were not able to maintain crew continuity as much as was planned. This had led to some early missed bins and an inconsistent service at times. We have invested in training more crew members on the food collections rounds to have better continuity when there is absence to cover. Other learning points have been:-

- *to encourage residents to place their food caddy in a prominent position and not hidden behind other larger bins;*
- *collecting details of local arrangements that the refuse and recycling crews have been operating to but that were not recorded on the waste collection system; and*
- *trialling communal bin facilities in areas where individual caddies are not feasible.*

Initially, the Council was not able to return for missed collections due to capacity, but this has now changed due to settled teams on the two food waste vehicles. Crews now have to return to any genuine collections that they miss, thus enforcing the correct collection point for the crews.

Supplementary question and answer.

Have any further measures been introduced to improve collection?

Answer

The ability for residents to now log missed food waste bins on line will lead to an improved service.

4. Please could you share the time line/targets for the roll out to the different regions of the city?

As explained at the scrutiny presentation earlier in the year the Council is now at its capacity to accept food waste at Exton Road under the terms of our Environment Agency permit. It will not be able to commit to a timetable for further food waste roll out until the improvements to the Exton Road depot are completed and the limits on our permit lifted.

5. Are there any additional challenges or barriers might we face with the roll out to all areas of the city?

Recruitment of drivers and loaders is always a challenge but there has been more success with driver training lately as mentioned before. The uncertainty over central government policy on waste and recycling and the possibility of associated funding for new burdens also does not help with investment decisions.

Supplementary question and answer.

Are the problems associated with the collection of communal caddies being addressed?

Answer

Collections from houses in multiple occupation are less straight forward.

The Government's delay in providing guidance on household and business recycling, such as a deposit return scheme for glass collection, remains an issue. However, the team continues to seek improvements, such as identifying additional collection capacity as the rounds settle down. Members will be kept advised of progress.

6. Please could we have an update on the refurbishments of the MRF and the expected timeline for the completion of this work?

The investment in the MRF, which also includes the regulatory work required to alter the Environmental Permit, has been tendered and, like many tenders, at the moment has come back significantly higher than the estimate. With the Council's ongoing financial pressures this is currently unaffordable and alternative options are being explored via an options appraisal. The results of this work and any additional funding requirements will be brought to members via the usual committee process.

Role of questions and answers under Standing Order 20

Given the length of the time taken to respond to the questions received, the Chair invited suggestions for streamlining the system.

Suggestions included incorporating the relevant questions into the regular Portfolio Holder updates and the circulation of both questions and answers in advance of the meeting. Whilst the timing of the receipt of questions might require fine tuning prior circulation of the answers, this was considered an acceptable solution and would be put to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Programme Board.

It was recognised that a question and answer session helped inform the public of important issues and Members also referred to the need to focus more on the in depth scrutiny of issues/individual areas with an emphasis on outcomes as discussed at the recent scrutiny training exercise led by Bethan Evans.

28 **Update from the Portfolio Holder for Place and City Management - Councillor Williams**

Councillor Williams reported on the Place and City Management areas of her Portfolio, detailing the issues relating to achieving the Council's published priorities, major ongoing programmes of work, issues impacting delivery, financial performance and budget requirements and potential changes being considered. She referred to her shadowing of various services in recent months including bin collection including food waste, the Materials Re-cycling Facility, Car Park Enforcement, litter bin emptying and road sweeping.

She highlighted the following:-

- following the introduction of food waste collection, 700,000 kg of waste had been diverted from black bins since April;
- the acceptance of the Harbour Revision Order application prior to the deadline after which the cost would have increased;
- a successful Heritage Harbour Festival on 23-24 September 2023;
- the first phase of the food waste collection which had been well received.

In respect of the litter bin review and the removal of a number of bins, the Service Manager Public and Green Space had carried out one to one briefings with Members as part of street cleaning optimisations. The changes had been introduced as part of a vital savings exercise, including the decision not to fill existing vacancies. Delivery schedules for both deep clean and litter vans would be optimised and an update on the overall cleansing regime would be provided in the New Year after the evaluation had been completed. Section 106 contributions were utilised as far as possible from new developments to enhance litter bin provision and liaison was taking place with

businesses with view to possible sponsorship/involvement for the provision/retention of litter bins. Further feedback from Members on locating litter bins was welcome.

Members were advised that Ash Die Back was spreading more slowly than expected although it was still anticipated that over 90% of trees would be lost and, consequently, the budget for remedial works would be rolled over

29 **Homelessness Strategy - six month progress report**

The Service Lead, Housing Needs and Homelessness presented the report providing an update on the recommendations of the Homelessness Task and Finish Working Group. The update covered the key Issues in the last six months and progress under the new Homelessness Strategy which included actions to progress the recommendations of the Working Group which had met in the Autumn of 2022 with a number of key stakeholders and statutory providers. Members were also advised that key data reporting demand, outcomes and trends would be circulated via the new Housing Needs quarterly newsletter and that further reports would be submitted on progress with the actions within the Strategy. He emphasised that it was not simply a City Council policy document, but a strategy to be owned by the whole of Exeter.

He enlarged on progress made on the action points 1 to 19 below.

Action points 1 to 8 involved lobbying of Government and external bodies, in particular seeking an overhaul of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Scheme to more accurately reflect Exeter's circumstances in order to help individuals afford new homes or sustain tenancies. He advised that this was one of the areas to be raised for consideration by the Devon Housing Commission chaired by Lord Best and that the City Council would be submitting evidence to the Commission. Other areas being examined by the Commission included second home ownership and house building. A key ask was for central funding to extend beyond a one to three year support period to provide for long term planning and commitment.

Action points 9 to 12 involved system changes through working with local statutory partners and stakeholders to maximise current resources and identify new resources and strengthen partnership working.

Action points 13 to 19 related to the City Council's own processes including developing a more formalised partnership with statutory bodies and local accommodation and support providers through the Homelessness Housing Forum. Prioritising budgets to maximise capacity was also important and the Council had committed capital match funding through the Local Authority Housing Fund to purchase housing for those households who had come to the UK from Ukraine and Afghanistan through the Ukraine Family Scheme, the Homes for Ukraine Scheme and the Afghan Resettlement Scheme. Exeter was the only area where no one had become homeless after leaving Afghanistan Bridging hotels. A further initiative was the recent leasing of 16 units to provide additional temporary accommodation housing.

Responding to a Member who raised issues around Children's services highlighting a case where a young person felt safer sleeping in a tent rather than facing anti-social behaviour/drug taking etc. in shared accommodation, the Service Lead, Housing Needs and Homelessness referred to the Council and partners targeting funds for new supported housing units for homeless young persons including care leavers. Gap analyses had been co-designed with partners and completed for both Rough Sleeping needs and high needs Young Persons services. It was a key partnership

milestone in preparation for a November bid for capital and revenue to the Supported Housing Accommodation Programme (SHAP).

In response to a Member asking what is needed to end rough sleeping, the Service Lead, Housing Needs and Homelessness estimated that there was a requirement for 100 supported units which was costly to implement. The provision of safe, welcoming accommodation was vital to assist the street attached to progress into recovery and would also help address issues around sofa surfing, county lines and sexual exploitation. However, the 100 units would not necessarily be sufficient added capacity to address future flow onto the street from loss of supported accommodation and from institutional settings.

The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homelessness Prevention referenced the importance of statutory partners and others working collaboratively across Devon and that it was not solely a District Council responsibility. Increasing the capacity and funding around mental health services, substance misuse, care of younger persons and care-leavers was crucial with, for example, 151 care leavers currently across the County.

The Chair invited Councillor M. Mitchell, the Chair of the Task and Finish Working Group, to address the Committee. Councillor Mitchell thanked the Service Lead, Housing Needs and Homelessness for the report and Councillor Denning who had first submitted the request for a review of regarding the impact of any increase in homelessness in Exeter as a result of benefit cuts and increases in the cost of living. He re-iterated the need to seek a review of the Local Housing Allowance which impacted on the homeless, those in rented accommodation as well as the employed. He stated that the average rent for a two bed property outside London was £1,278. Exeter was not below this average but was below the Local Housing Allowance rate.

Councillor Denning, the Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development and Support Services, also thanked the Service Lead, Housing Needs and Homelessness for the report, stating that she worked closely with the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homelessness Prevention on this area. She particularly praised the work in rehousing refugees which had received much praise through social media.

Responding to a Member's query, the Service Lead, Housing Needs and Homelessness confirmed that homelessness and street attached was not necessarily linked to anti-social behaviour. He advised that the City Council and the Police were drafting an action plan to challenge and unpick social connections to the street and which could also reduce enforcement solutions which ultimately fall short when reaching the Crown Prosecution Service. A report would be submitted to the Community Safety Partnership. He also referred to ethnographical studies undertaken with those who had experienced rough sleeping to help provide a better understanding of the problem.

Other initiatives included the availability of basic hygiene (showers and toilet facilities) which partners are still investigating and the identification of alternative venues such as drinking-permitted space in the city.

A Member moved that the Council seek to lobby the Government to provide additional funding to ensure the provision of 100 units of supported accommodation for ending rough sleeping including for young people and to change the Local Housing Allowance.

The motion was moved, seconded and carried unanimously.

RECOMMENDED that Council:-

- (1) be requested to agree to lobbying the City's MP's and prospective MP's, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Local Government Association to:-
 - secure sufficient funding to provide for 100 units of supported accommodation for rough sleepers and young people; and
 - change the Local Housing Allowance by restoring the link to the lower quartile of the rental market; and
- (2) note the progress on the following 19 action points which were divided into those relating to Government/external bodies and those more within the Council's sphere of influence. Progress was reported in italics:-

Government/External Bodies:

-

- (1) To seek via the City's two MP's and the Local Government Association a fundamental review and overhaul of the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Scheme with consideration to be given to the Allowance reflecting Exeter's circumstances as an urban area in its own right and not averaged with neighbouring authorities in the assessment of the allowance

The fundamental affordability issue resulting from the gap between market rents and LHA rates has been a repeated theme arising the Afghan bridging hotel resettlement programme work. Housing authorities up and down the country have repeatedly raised LHA as the key barrier to affordability and homelessness reduction with key ministers and in the presence of lead Home Office and DLUHC personnel. ECC council officers have lent support to this message to Government during webinars and seminars. The response has been that the Government is listening.

It was hoped that the high profile of the Afghan programme amidst the wider refugee resettlement challenges could be the vehicle that finally levers an uplift in LHA rates. However whilst this has not yet materialised the local action to propose a review of the Broad Market Rental Area via local MP offices is outstanding and will now be followed up by officers.

- (2) To lobby Central Government to increase the ability for local authorities to build social housing

Specific lobbying action has not yet been initiated due to other priorities. Elements of specific activity relating to this agenda remain in play through Planning and the HRA development programme. It is proposed that the Council feeds this and other nationally / regionally relevant lobbying actions via its engagement with the Devon Housing Commission.

- (3) To lobby Central Government for the funding of local authorities and agencies to be for a minimum of three years for projects relating to housing provision, as opposed to short term support
- (4) To lobby Central Government to support changes to the planning system to control/limit short term lets and holiday homes

- (5) To lobby Central Government to support the abolition of Section 21 evictions
- (6) To lobby Central Government to support the reform of the Business Tax and Council Tax regimes for an equitable contribution in respect of all properties
- (7) To seek a Government review of the current operation of the deposit system for private rented properties for mediation to get an agreement to last no longer than 28 days after which the full deposit is returned. This will assist the tenant to obtain a further deposit for an alternative property.

For actions 3 to 7 it is proposed that the Council also feeds these through the Devon Housing Commission.

- (8) To seek the support of the Crown and Magistrate Courts for the use of Plain English regarding paperwork relating to court proceedings

Not yet actioned.

- (9) To align with the County Council webpages to ensure linkage on information and advice that helps people to find early help and prevent people from becoming at risk of homelessness wherever possible

Focus on this action has to date been joint working with DCC Children's Services and Corporate Parenting directorate to finalise the working protocols between County and District / City housing authorities in homelessness 16-17 year olds and Care Leavers aged 18-25. The Care Leaver protocol has been approved by the leading District officers (including Legal teams) as at w/b 11.09.23. This is a key milestone in establishing an improved robust joint prevention approach across both authority tiers. Alignment of communication and marketing of the protocol alongside key information to young persons and representing agencies has been agreed by all partners. The expectation is that revised information will go live by the end of the calendar year.

Alignment of wider homelessness advice and help information including website content and format is outstanding and to be agreed once the local homelessness funding position is finalised post-December.

- (10) To work with Devon County Council's Children's Services, to ensure the Homelessness Prevention Worker function is able to help young people earlier and prevent them becoming at risk of homelessness wherever possible including young people leaving care and making better use of existing tools like Positive Pathways to improve supporting young people earlier on)

This action is part of the overall work with Corporate Parenting and to be developed within the new best practice Champion model due for Cabinet sign off this September. It is proposed that County and Districts will review the homelessness prevention resources under the "Care For Me" subgroup in order to focus on current delivery and gaps in accommodation and support services. The HPW function is to be reviewed alongside the current capacity for personal assistant casework with key focus on improving tenancy rescue. The Council is assessing options to work with County on the Supported Housing Accommodation Programme which will include an assessment of potential use of local County land / buildings for new housing for care leavers. Additional funding for support and earlier intervention work is to be deployed to care leavers through the "Staying Close" fund.

The above work is being progressed under the joint countywide approach to the Corporate Parenting duty which is currently a central priority on the monthly Team Devon CEX agenda.

- (11) To seek increased/joint service contributions from Devon County Council in co-production areas of work e.g. substance misuse services, social care, young persons including care-leavers etc.

Action relating to young persons and care leavers is reported as above. In relation to the needs of the wider cohort, having played a key role in the submission of data and impact information to the recent homelessness funding consultation, the Council is engaged with County in the co-design of a position statement on homelessness. This work is scheduled to produce an integrated view of homelessness need including multi-disciplinary funding models and proposals by the end of November.

Outside of this the Council has been working with local substance misuse and social care partners to develop new capacity for support to adults and young persons with complex and multiple need. This is being co-ordinated under the local joint working with Public Health drug and alcohol funding to grow additional capacity within services aligned to the model of trauma-informed relational practice as delivered by the (award winning) ECC-led Navigator service.

- (12) To seek increased capacity around mental health services including support for the newly formed Mental Health Alliance and building on existing City Council officer support in this area

Work to develop more capacity and improved delivery / outcomes for homeless people in Exeter is being led by Colab with support from the Council. One recent focus has been the recruitment of the mental health navigator and re-establishing the model of pathway interface with the statutory mental health service. Further work is required in this area to drive up capacity beyond what is currently a very limited resource in relation to need and demand.

The Council continues to fund via RSI grant monies the psychological wellbeing support service Real Life Psychology which supports clients and staff with key coping skills and reflective practice.

Exeter City Council responsibilities:

- (13) To undertake a city wide response to homelessness, through a more formalised partnership approach building on the city's social capital and developing flourishing communities - this could be via the proposed Homelessness Housing Forum (HFF) comprised of local accommodation and support providers to see the system as a whole and address blocks and barriers. The HFF will build on learning from the Exeter Homelessness Partnership Alliance as well as from national examples of good practice e.g. Homeless Link. This will build on the existing co-production mechanisms and with the ultimate aim of offering accommodation on first presentation. The involvement of the business/private sector will also be sought.

A number of work development areas have been in progress over the last 6 months:

- *The renewal of a revised Exeter Homelessness Forum, building on the work of the 3-year funded Exeter Homelessness Partnership. The key focus to date has been co-ordinated response to the DCC homelessness funding consultation but other priority work is to revise the alternative giving scheme, raise resource for basic need / survival facilities (toilets, shelter, drinking water etc.) and develop wider service co-*

production with lived experience including education, training and employment pathways

- *Meetings with key civic partners to develop the action plan around relieving street-attached need including city centre ASB. This is a multi-agency partnership including the Council, police, civic partners such as Education, Commerce and businesses.*
- *The Council has continued to lead the Ending Rough Sleeping forum with homelessness and housing partners including some wider stakeholders. Part of the agenda is the development of wider engagement of partners such as Public Health with a view to build strategic consensus toward a wider Homelessness Reduction board*

The governance model proposed in the new Homelessness strategy has not yet been established due to other pressing priorities and is now set to be road-tested over the next 6 months by diverging the above key stakeholder meetings to pilot one strategic homelessness forum for Exeter.

- (14) To maximise renewal of the City Council contract(s) with providers with Member involvement to add greater focus on key areas and targets, including analysis of the evidence base

Contract renewals are in progression with temporary accommodation providers as a key priority given the pressure of statutory accommodation demand and the current squeeze on funding for housing-related support. The Council is prioritising the more risk-tolerant higher performing providers whilst assessing ongoing improvement agendas with other services alongside alternative service models (including in-house provision).

Contracts with young person's services for Homeless Prevention Workers were renewed in February but are now subject to the overall review with Corporate Parenting before any extension or procurement decisions will be taken for April 2024 onwards.

The Council has recently undertaken a contract review and negotiated a funding extension with MOJ/Probation services for its prison resettlement service.

The Council and Citizens Advice Exeter have continued with review meetings (CAE with new CEO from April) focusing on current trends and practice issues with a view to prioritise work streams in time for contract renewal in 2024. Demand on services sub-contracted to CAE and Homemaker SW remain high especially in areas such as household affordability, income maximisation, and arrears and debt management. Next steps will include further relationship building (referrals and communications) with the Council's housing advice services and strengthening of prevention-focused activity.

- (15) To seek the involvement of a third party organisation in statutory homelessness mediation cases

The Council has maintained contact with the Shelter (Plymouth) lead officer. Reviews and appeals of homelessness decisions have remained stable in number. The majority are appeals against social housing banding decisions and predominantly appear to be reflective of personal frustration (lack of housing availability and waiting lists) as opposed to incorrect decisions by the Council. The Council has recently proposed a policy amendment regarding appeals whereby (subject to Devon Home Choice approval) those that are not supported by additional supporting evidence or a change in circumstances following the initial decision may be rejected.

The Council plans to invite a third party advocacy service to monitor these cases as a first check and balance into this area of work. This is also for the purpose of trialling a new partner relationship wherein a mediation option may be developed for challenging prevention cases.

- (16) To welcome and support the In Exeter commitment to the provision of drinking fountains in the city centre and seek the review of the 24/7 provision of public toilets in the city

This action has not yet been progressed. It is likely to be on the priority agenda for the Exeter Homelessness Forum as per point 13.

- (17) To welcome and support One Exeter's review of the use of Plain English for Council tax and other written communications rather than by telephone

This action has not yet been progressed to completion. An option to add a summary statement to the letters atop the necessary policy and legal-led statutory language to be taken to Council Tax lead officer.

- (18) To seek City Council commitment to a continuation of funding for the leasing and purchasing options programme for the supported and temporary accommodation programme

To date the development of leasehold options to relieve pressure on temporary accommodation has not required additional budget from the Council general fund. Since February eight properties (7 new builds and 1 private market) have been purchased and added to the Council's HRA stock under the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) programme. An additional 5 properties are currently under offer / conveyance under LAHF round 2. These properties alongside 3 new PSL properties have been instrumental in ensuring no families were without a housing offer or made homeless as a result of the closing of the bridging hotels in Exmouth and Exeter in August.

In the last few weeks three new properties (16 units) have been leased by the Council for additional temporary accommodation housing. The transfer of some households into these properties will temporarily reduce the cost to the Council of use of hotel and B&B accommodation. This is key to the Housing Needs savings plan under the mid-term financial plan. However a combination of continuing pressures on statutory homelessness demand plus the limited existing capacity in housing-related support have not yet resulted in equivalent lasting reductions in hotel and B&B use. The Council is planning to combat this through increasing the number of leased units plus bidding into the SHAP fund respectively.

- (19) To seek City Council commitment to the expansion of the Housing First model particularly through local registered social landlords

As a first step the Council has led by example and committed to resource five existing 1-bed flats as additional Housing First (HF) tenancies to the existing 15 within Council HRA stock. Whilst one local housing association has also provided 7 units of accommodation under the HF model the scheme will be taken to wider partners as part of the leading Homelessness Reduction Board operational action plan.

30 **Update on street cleansing, bins and litter following the changed approach.**

The Chair reported that, following one to one briefings with Members, the update report would be submitted to the Committee in the New Year.

31 **Healthy Homes**

The Chair reported that a request for the scrutiny of Healthy Homes standards would be addressed as part of the report of the Director City Development on the new 'Exeter Plan' to be submitted to the meeting of the Strategic Scrutiny Committee on 16 November 2023. The report would outline the purpose, scope and content of the Plan and Members would be able to consider what further work they would wish to see, including any work on Healthy Homes, to strengthen the plan for the pre-submission version. Any resource implications would also need to be considered by SMB and the relevant Portfolio Holders.

Members noted the position.

32 **Scrutiny Programme Board Annual Report**

The Chair, as a member of the Scrutiny Programme Board, presented the Board's report which offered an annual update in respect of the Scrutiny work achieved during the Municipal Year 2022/23. He stated that it was the intention for future Annual Reports to set out in greater detail the areas scrutinised and to include the outcomes achieved. A Member requested that the list of ongoing requests for scrutiny, including those submitted using the agreed proformas, be circulated to all Members. The list, which included the status of each item, was now included on the agenda for meetings of the Scrutiny Programme Board and a Member also asked if the list could cover previous years and not just the last 12 months.

Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee noted the Annual Scrutiny Report 2022/23 which would be presented to Executive to note and to recommend to Council to approve.

33 **Forward Plan of Business and Scrutiny Work Plan**

The Chair reported the receipt of a number of additional proforma requests for scrutiny, some of which were effectively refreshing similar requests previously submitted.

Members noted the Forward Plan and the Scrutiny Work Plan.

34 **Howard Bassett**

The Chair reported that this would be Howard Bassett's last Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee prior to his retirement.

The Chair and Members thanked Howard for his service to the Council and wished him well on his retirement.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.09 pm

Chair