

EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

Tuesday 20 February 2024

Present:-

The Right Worshipful the Lord Mayor Councillor Kevin Mitchell (Lord Mayor)

Councillors Allcock, Asvachin, Begley, Bennett, Bialyk, Branston, Denning, Miller, Mitchell, M, Moore, D, Parkhouse, Patrick, Pearce, Read, Rees, Sheridan, Snow, Sparling, Vizard, Wardle, Warwick, Williams, M, Williams, R, Wood and Wright

Apologies:-

Councillors Atkinson and Morse

Also Present:-

Chief Executive, Director Finance, Service Lead Legal Services, Democratic Services Manager and Democratic Services Officer (PMD)

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PUBLIC QUESTIONS

The Lord Mayor reported the receipt of five questions from members of the public.

Question from Sharon Whitgreave to Councillor Bialyk, Leader.

“In the Wellbeing Exeter video, a councillor states, “Wellbeing Exeter brings people together to work in partnership, to collaborate, share ideas and best practices.” Do the councillors have a plan for Wellbeing Exeter to work with Citizens Advice to ensure that residents can access specialist and accredited advice and information?”

The Leader asked Councillor Pearce, Portfolio Holder for Communities & Homelessness Prevention, to answer Ms Whitgreave’s question. Cllr Pearce gave the following response:

Wellbeing Exeter partners already sign post people to a range of advocacy and advice services both in the city and online including CAE. This will continue as normal.

In a supplementary question, Ms Whitgreave expanded on the range of expert services provided by Citizens Advice and enquired about any formal arrangements between Exeter Wellbeing and Citizens Advice to ensure that residents received the service they deserved. Cllr Pearce responded that discussions were ongoing between Exeter City Council and Citizens Advice aimed at providing residents with the service they needed.

Question from Carolyn Naylor to Councillor Bialyk, Leader.

“The Dix’s Field office space has issues with damp, roof structure and plumbing. If Citizens advice relocates due to high rent charges, do councillors

realistically think they will find alternative tenants to pay the expected rent given the number of empty office spaces in the city?”

The Leader asked Councillor Pearce, Portfolio Holder for Communities & Homelessness Prevention, to answer Ms Naylor’s question. Cllr Pearce gave the following response:

The repair of the flat roof is scheduled to take place during 2024 as part of Council’s capital programme. This information would be made available to any prospective future tenant if any office space becomes vacant.

Question from Joe Oliver to Councillor Bialyk, Leader.

“Will the Council consider and cost the impact a reduced Citizens Advice service, necessitated by a loss of funding, would have on residents; for example, the potential loss of the benefits tribunal services and court repossession services, and Citizens Advice Exeter no longer having an office in the city centre?”

The Leader asked Councillor Pearce, Portfolio Holder for Communities & Homelessness Prevention, to answer Mr Oliver’s question. Cllr Pearce gave the following response:

The council intends to offer CAE a grant transitional grant of £75,000 for 2024/25 it will be up to the management of CAE to prioritise which aspects of their work are continued. CAE have previously refused offers of alternative office accommodation in the Civic Centre including shared space within the Council’s Customer Contact Centre.

In a supplementary question, Mr Oliver sought clarity about who adjudicated on grant applications such as rent grants. The Leader explained to Mr Oliver that any application for a grant would be treated within the normal process, namely through the Leader and the Executive Committee and through Council at the appropriate time.

Question from James Banyard to Councillor Bialyk, Leader.

“Recently I reported pavement flooding due to a drain blocked with leaves. DCC said they would clear the gully, but that leaf sweeping was an issue for ECC. It’s hard for residents to know what to do next. How can co-ordination between ECC and DCC be improved?”

The Leader asked Councillor R Williams, Portfolio Holder for Place and City Management, to answer Mr Banyard’s question. Cllr R Williams gave the following response:

Every road within Exeter is on a mechanical sweeping route with visitation scheduled between 6 – 12 times a year dependent on the location. Outside of these visits, residents can report leaf litter on the council’s website and either a mechanical sweeper or deep clean team will attend as soon as resources allow. Sweeping schedules do not always prevent leaf litter that falls in between visits, from superficially covering gullies which can lead to standing water. Reporting these

types of issue to us, for action is therefore an important part of keeping the city clean and safe.

The DCC gully clearance programme clears gullies in the city on average once every three years. This programme generally ensures that standing water should drain within 24 hours. If the standing water remains in place 24 hours after the rain has stopped, or where there is a speed limit of 40mph or above in force, the issue should be reported to DCC who will take action.

In a supplementary question, Mr Banyard asked what practical measures could be taken within both councils to ensure joined-up working. Cllr R Williams directed Mr Banyard to the Exeter City Council website for additional information on the subject and thanked him for bringing this matter to the attention of the Council.

Question from John Butler to Councillor Bialyk, Leader.

“The ECC report states the current level of subsidy to allotments is £15,418 which is expected to rise above £25,000 in 2024-5. The proposed rent increase (41%0 nets £21,400. Can ECC provide financial evidence to justify the excessive increase in required subsidy (65%) & how current rental is spent?”

The Leader asked Councillor R Williams, Portfolio Holder for Place and City Management, to answer Mr Butler’s question. Cllr R Williams gave the following response:

At the point the allotment report was submitted, the council subsidy for the allotment service was predicted to be approximately £15K. However, since the addition of water costs in quarter 3, and after adding National Insurance and Superannuation from the national pay rise, the final council subsidy for 2023/24 is now forecasted to be closer to £34K.

Expenditure will remain at around £98K and income expected to remain at around £63k. The budgets for 2024/25 are set to remain the same, with inflationary uplifts applied only to pay, electricity and insurance. Other costs are expected to remain largely stable, as is income. As ever, inflationary costs for materials are an unknown but these will be monitored in year. The allotment team be providing a breakdown of budget forecasts on the Council’s FAQ page so that allotment holders can review the forecasts in more depth.

In a supplementary question, Mr Butler asked if the Council would consider metrics of a non-financial nature, such as wellbeing, when setting allotment rents. Cllr R Williams assured Mr Butler that the responses from the ongoing consultation on allotments would influence the Council’s thinking and decision-making and that the wellbeing of residents was one of the many factors considered.

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TO RECEIVE MINUTES 6, 7, 8 AND 9 OF THE COMBINED STRATEGIC SCRUTINY AND CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 7 FEBRUARY 2024

Councillors Harvey and Snow left the meeting, having declared an interest relating to the Budget as Council allotment tenants.

Responding to a Member’s query, the Lord Mayor clarified that the recommendation at **Minute No. 5** (‘Capital Strategy 2024-25’) was for the Executive and not Council. The minutes were taken as read and noted.

3 **TO RECEIVE MINUTE 11 OF THE EXECUTIVE OF 9 JANUARY 2024**

The minute was noted and adopted.

4 **BUDGET 2024/25**

The Leader moved, and Councillor Wright seconded, the resolution as set out in the agenda and circulated papers in respect of the Council Tax for Exeter for 2024/25.

The following alternative budget had been submitted by the Progressive Group:-

Alternatives to the proposed budget by the Progressive Group – received Wednesday 14 February 2024

Proposer: Councillor Diana Moore

Seconder: Councillor Michael Mitchell

The Progressive Group noted the Budget put forward and proposed the following amendments to the medium term financial strategy:-

Amendment 1: Capital Budget: investment in improving recycling and food waste service.

To address the £6 million funding gap of the £8 million required for the materials reclamation facility in the MTFs and establish a doorstep glass recycling service:

- a) *Sale of the Civic Centre - a minimum of £2.5m capital income;*
- b) *Reallocation of the Civic Centre HFX Door Access Requirement (£100,000) to this purpose;*
- c) *Fund the remainder by using unallocated CIL and undertaking a review of the CIL budget of projects which have underspent or have allocated resources that have not yet been used, in order to prioritise investment in the MRF and doorstep glass recycling collections.*

Amendment 2: Service Improvements over medium term financial plan.

Improve efficiencies and cooperation between Councils: *Negotiate a move of back office functions to Devon County Council offices or, failing that, another property within ECC portfolio. Operating costs assumed to be similar in terms of overheads and a reduction in office space requirement. Move to be funded by £100,000 of the additional revenue grant received from Government and funds from the sale of the property as required.*

Investment in customer services: *To move ECC customer service centre to an empty shop in the Guildhall Shopping Centre to provide an accessible and welcoming public face and regenerate an empty shop in the Guildhall with an anchor tenant: the Council. The set up and the overhead operating costs to be funded by the unearmarked surplus from the Guildhall Shopping Centre.*

To undertake a review of Leisure Services with a view to being on a stable financial basis over the life of the MTFs with the aim of becoming cost neutral.

Amendment 3. Service Improvements for 2024-25 budget

Allotment Service: £40,000

- *Reverse the 2024/25 in year allotment fee increase of £20,450 to spread this over three years so that the fees cover service costs over a three-year period. Assuming 5% inflation each year thereafter, this is an addition to the MTFS of £15,030 to 26/27.*
- *To invest £24,969 in allotment improvements in discussion with allotment holders.*
- *Both of these points above to be funded by £40,000 from the additional revenue grant received from Government.*
- *To reduce administration costs by enabling a direct debit service for the payment of fees.*
- *Introduce a deposit scheme equivalent to three months' rent (except for those in receipt of any benefits) to be forfeited should a tenant be evicted due to non-cultivation. Forfeited deposits to be reinvested in allotment improvements.*
- *Investigate the development of new allotment sites on HRA land for council housing tenants using funds from the uncommitted HRA working balance.*

Investment in Street Cleansing: £67,770

Increase all day car parking by £2, the price of a single bus fare, in zones 1 & 2 and in Zone 3 by £3 (taking an all-day ticket to £8) to generate £67,770 to mitigate the cuts and invest into the street cleansing services.

Flagship Parks and Green Spaces: Invest £43,575

Extend the charging periods on a Thursday evening for the John Lewis, Guildhall, Mary Arches to align with the charges for those car parks on every other night of the week. To generate £25,605. To reallocate budget line for a chatbot (£17,970). All to be invested in the City Centre parks and green spaces infrastructure and planting.

Ensuring a well run Council: *Appointment of a part-time (.5) Scrutiny Officer (Grade H, £22,920) to improve the scrutiny arrangements of the Executive and across all Council services. To be funded by a 50% contribution from each of the HRA and general fund unallocated surplus for each fund.*

After Councillor Moore had read out the proposed amendments above, the Lord Mayor opened the floor to debate.

Members speaking in favour of the alternative Budget proposals made the following points:-

- the proposed sale of the Civic Centre was a bold and welcome move;
- moving the Exeter City Council customer service to the Guildhall shopping centre made perfect sense;
- more time was needed to implement changes to the allotment scheme;
- scrutiny in its current format was failing in its role in holding the Executive to account;
- many litter bins needed replacing;
- the alternative budget better reflected the priorities of the people of Exeter;
- the leisure budget had been adequately managed;
- Exeter, as a city, needed a fresh set of ideas;
- there was a sense that the proposed changes to the allotment scheme had been decided despite the current consultation; and
- there was currently no strategic plan aimed at promoting biodiversity in Exeter, as witnessed by its absence from the Council website's front page.

Speaking against the alternative Budget, a Member criticised the proposed increase in parking charges, arguing that:-

- the bus service in Exeter was not practical;
- retail trade was struggling; and
- motorists were an 'easy target'.

Councillor Mitchell, in seconding the amendment, made the following points:-

- any Council was only ever as good as its Scrutiny process;
- there was a need for improving both services and governance.

Councillor Moore, in commending the alternative Budget to Council, made the following points:-

- the proposed increase in parking charges applied to all-day tickets only;
- there was no need for the Council to sit on underused assets and unused developer levies; and
- it was unfortunate that no comment had been made on the proposed amendments by the Labour Group.

Councillor Bialyk, speaking as Leader, advised that his group would not be supporting the alternative budget and that any comments he may have on the alternative budget of the Progressive Group would be made during the debate on the substantive budget.

The alternative Budget proposals of the Progressive Group were put to the vote and LOST.

The Leader, in presenting his Budget speech, (appended to this set of minutes), covered the following themes:-

- there was a statutory duty in setting a balanced budget for the year ahead;
- the current cost of borrowing;
- the challenges for the Council ahead for 2025/26;
- the five key strategic priorities;
- how the Council has been using its Household Support Fund allocation;
- the findings from the Centre for Cities report, Cities Outlook 2024;
- the modernisation of the CCTV coverage in Exeter;
- the forthcoming review of car parking charges, specifically for Sundays and for Thursday evenings;
- the rolling programme of playground improvements;
- the success of St Sidwell's Point;
- Leisure services;
- new schemes introduced by the Housing Team;
- delivery of the Homelessness Strategy Action Plan;
- the retrofit programme;
- the Edwards Court Extra Care housing scheme;
- funding of the new core Wellbeing Exeter programme in 2024/2025;
- the new £3.5m Water Lane Smart Grid and Storage Project;
- the planting of 107 trees across the city's open spaces;
- the extension by three weeks of the consultation on allotments until 15 March;
- how any increase in charges would be phased in over two years;
- the successes of the Corn Exchange and many other places of culture in the city;

- the One Exeter programme;
- the letting of office space in Phase One of the Civic Centre;
- the current drawing up of plans for alternative accommodation options to the Civic Centre; and
- the impending Senior Management restructure.

The Leader then talked Members through the details of the Budget itself, explaining that its approval would result in the setting of a District Council tax of £180.37 for a Band D property - an increase of £5.24 a year for a Band D property.

Councillor Moore, as co-leader of the Progressive Group, thanked the Leader for his detailed Budget speech and Council staff for their hard work. Furthermore, she:-

- commended the retrofit scheme;
- regretted that no mention had been made of affordable housing, noting that Exeter City Council had not met its targets;
- stressed the importance of how the CIL was spent;
- expressed concerns about cutting car parking charges;
- remarked that too many residents were still left out of the food waste recycling scheme;
- detected inconsistency in the Council's commitment to offering glass collection on the doorstep;
- expressed concerns about the Council's ability to keep on top of asset repairs;
- stressed the importance of consulting residents;
- reminded Members that the Budget had to be seen in the context of chronic underfunding from the Government; and
- called for reassurances that the Council's services will make a difference for all communities across Exeter.

Councillor Jobson, as leader of the Conservative Group, announced that she would be supporting the budget but offered particular thanks to the officers who had helped set the budget. She further welcomed:-

- the plans for a review of the car parking charges;
- the extension to the consultation on allotments and the phasing in of any rent increases; and
- the fact that the Council was currently unable to borrow, given the context of the £166m worth of debt.

A number of Members spoke in favour of the Budget and commented on:-

- the dynamism and proactiveness demonstrated by Exeter City Council for the past nine years;
- the success of Wellbeing Exeter despite Devon County Council and the NHS withdrawing funding;
- the £75,000 grant for Citizens Advice;
- the national picture and the cuts in real terms since 2010;
- Exeter City Council's place in the top 5 District Councils in the country for Net Zero;
- the importance of actions rather than words on green policies;
- the 100 certified passive homes;
- the need for all Members to be involved in discussions about street cleansing changes;
- how many of the policies suggested by the Progressive Group were already being implemented by the current administration;

- the importance of carrying on with existing policies rather than seeking new ideas;
- the successes of Exeter City Council's leisure services in the context of the difficulties experienced by the leisure industry nationwide;
- the non-partisan nature of the news.exeter.gov.uk website;
- the success of the GP referral service;
- partnership achievements;
- the role of Labour in Exeter; and
- heritage achievements.

Speaking against the Budget, a Member praised officers and Portfolio Holders for their hard work and noted the frustrations occasioned by the council tax constraints. He made the following comments:-

- it was unclear whether the reasons for the Council's economic successes were causal or coincidental;
- Parkwood Leisure used to pay Exeter City Council for the use of its leisure facilities;
- the Council's debt now stood at £95 million;
- the museum rebuild had gone over budget;
- while he did not disagree with the idea of investment, he stressed the importance of being mindful of the consequences; and
- parts of the city were still not covered by the food waste recycling scheme.

Councillor Wright, in seconding the proposal, reminded Members of the context of the cuts instigated by the Coalition government and made the following points:-

- borrowing had been necessary;
- Exeter City Council would continue to invest in wellbeing programmes;
- all Exeter residents were suffering from reduced funds;
- it was crucial to maintain and develop partnerships;
- it was important to acknowledge the support received from community groups; and
- the balanced budget presented today was proof of a well-run Council.

In conclusion, the Leader thanked the Portfolio Holders and Members for their contributions to the debate and re-affirmed many of the points made. He made the following further comments:-

- the refurbishment of various play parks across the city was proof of the Council's commitment towards young people;
- if Exeter City Council had kept its contract with Parkwood Leisure, the service would have had to be withdrawn;
- a review of car park charges was imminent;
- the issues around food waste recycling had already been debated two years ago;
- there were 12 mobile teams picking up litter around the city;
- the extension of the consultation period on the allotments scheme was proof that Exeter City Council listened to its residents;
- the Council had a duty to look across all services provided to residents rather than choose selectively;
- the money loaned out to Exeter City Living (ECL) would be repaid;
- the Council was committed to providing affordable homes for the people of Exeter; and

- he expressed disappointment that the Progressive Group had submitted a late alternative Budget rather than reaching out to him with suggestions prior to the Budget.

The Leader commended the budget to Council.

In accordance with Standing Order 30, a named vote on the Resolution, as set out in the agenda papers, was recorded, as follows:-

Voting for:-

Councillors Allcock, Asvachin, Begley, Bialyk, Branston, Denning, Foale, Holland, Jobson, Ketchin, Knott, Leadbetter, Miller, Parkhouse, Patrick, Pearce, Vizard, Wardle, Warwick, M Williams, R Williams, Wood and Wright.

(23 Members)

Voting against:-

Councillors Fullam, Hannaford, M Mitchell, Moore and Read.

(5 Members)

Abstain:-

The Lord Mayor
Councillors Bennett, Rees, Sheridan and Sparling.

(5 Members)

Absent:-

Councillors Atkinson, Ellis-Jones, Harvey, Lights, Morse and Snow.

(6 Members)

The Resolution was CARRIED:-

RESOLVED:-

- (1) That the following, as submitted in the Estimates Book, be approved:-
 - (a) the Revenue estimates for 2024-2025;
 - (b) the Capital programme for 2024-2025;
 - (c) the Fees & Charges for 2024-25;
 - (d) the Treasury Management Strategy for 2024-2025;
 - (e) the Prudential indicators for 2024-2025 (incorporating the Minimum Revenue Provision Statement); and
 - (f) the Capital Strategy for 2024-2025.

- (2) that it be noted that, at the meeting of the Executive on the 9 January 2024, the Council calculated the figure of 39,045, as its council tax base for the year 2024-2025 in accordance with the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012 made under Section 33(5) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992;
- (3) that the following amounts be now calculated by the Council for the year 2024-2025 in accordance with Sections 31A of the Local Government and Finance Act 1992:-
- (a) £120,007,420 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2)(a) to (f) of the Act;
- (b) £112,964,874 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3)(a) to (d) of the Act;
- (c) £7,042,546 being the amount by which the aggregate at (3)(a) above exceeds the aggregate at (3)(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act, as its council tax requirement for the year;
- (d) £180.37 being the amount at (3)(c) above divided by the amount at 2 above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31B(1) of the Act, as the basic amount of its council tax for the year;

(e) Valuation Bands

A	B	C	D
£120.25	£140.29	£160.33	£180.37
E	F	G	H
£220.45	£260.53	£300.62	£360.74

Being the amount given by multiplying the amount at (3)(d) above by the number which, in the proportion set out in Section 5(1) of the Act, is applicable to dwellings listed in a particular valuation band divided by the number which in that proportion is applicable to dwellings listed in valuation band D, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 36(1) of the Act, as the amounts to be taken into account for the year in respect of categories of dwellings listed in different valuation bands.

- (4) That it will be noted that, for the year 2024-2025, Devon County Council, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Devon and Cornwall and the Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority have stated the following amounts on precepts issued to the Council, in accordance with Section 83 of the Local Government Act 2003, for each of the categories of the dwellings shown below:-

Devon County Council

A	B	C	D
£978.72	£1,141.84	£1,304.96	£1,468.08
E	F	G	H

£1,794.32	£2,120.56	£2,446.80	£2,936.16
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Devon County Council - Adult Social Care

A	B	C	D
£165.06	£192.57	£220.08	£247.59
E	F	G	H
£302.61	£357.63	£412.65	£495.18

Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Devon and Cornwall

A	B	C	D
£183.00	£213.50	£244.00	£274.50
E	F	G	H
£335.50	£396.50	£457.50	£549.00

Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Authority
Valuation Bands

A	B	C	D
£66.45	£77.53	£88.60	£99.68
E	F	G	H
£121.83	£143.98	£166.13	£199.36

- (5) That, having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at (3)(e) and (4) above, the Council, in accordance with Section 30(2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby set the following amounts as the amounts of council tax for the year 2024-2025 for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:-

Valuation Bands

A	B	C	D
£1,513.48	£1,765.73	£2,017.97	£2,270.22
E	F	G	H
£2,774.71	£3,279.20	£3,783.70	£4,540.44

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 8.26 pm)

Chair