

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

8 November 2011

Present:

Councillor Kevin Mitchell (Chair)

Councillors Thompson, Branston, Choules, Clark, A Hannaford, Hobden, Morris, Mottram, Newcombe, Tippins and Wardle

Director Community and Environment, Head of Contracts and Direct Services, Head of Environmental Health Services, Acting Head of Housing Services, Community Inclusion and Engagement Officer and Member Services Officer (HB)

Also present:

Councillor RM Hannaford - Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Involvement

Councillor Sheldon - Portfolio Holder for Environment and Leisure

61 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 September 2011 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

62 **Declaration of Interests**

Members declared the following personal (*prejudicial) interests:-

COUNCILLOR	MINUTE
Councillor Choules	65 (employee of the University of Exeter)
Councillor Newcombe	69 (Member of Devon County Council and Chair of the County Council's People's Scrutiny Committee)
Councillor Morris	72 (husband holds Leisure Centre Membership with Parkwood Leisure)
Councillor Mottram	*72 (his company undertakes work for Parkwood Leisure)

63 **Performance Housing Digest - Quarter I**

The Acting Head of Housing Services responded as follows to Members' queries on performance information relating to:-

- 2.5% of new affordable homes were to wheelchair accessible standard, against a target of 5%;
- seven extra-let private sector properties had been taken on with 27 in the pipe line, against a target of 35;

- the average turn around for empty properties was 24 days, against a target of 21. It was noted that new ways of operating had been taken on board by a new contractor and that large contractors were encouraged to make use of local businesses;
- the previous figure of 80 vacant garages had been reduced to 65, following an article in the Express and Echo. A full review of garages would be undertaken in 2012 including an examination of health and safety issues with view to lifting the restriction on usage of garages for cars only;
- 68% of empty properties had been visited within six weeks of vacancy, the draft figure for the end of Quarter II currently being 95%;
- emergency repairs being conducted on the same day was 96.7%, against a target of 99.5%; and
- although the legal obligation for conducting gas safety inspections was within 12 months, the rolling programme worked on a 10 month schedule of visits to factor in time to ensure that visits still occurred where access could be delayed.

64 **Minutes of Community Safety Strategy Group**

The minutes of Community Safety Strategy Group meetings are circulated after each meeting to Members of this Scrutiny Committee to enable them to raise any issues of concern or interest at these meetings and, if necessary, request referrals back to the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) for a response. Members can request individual agencies represented at the CDRP to attend a meeting of this Committee to answer any questions or address any concerns.

Members had no queries on the latest minutes circulated of the meetings held on 11 July and 12 September 2011.

65 **Reports of Portfolio Holders**

Councillor Choules declared a personal interest as an employee of the University of Exeter.

Councillors R.M. Hannaford and Sheldon presented progress reports on priorities within the Housing and Community Involvement Portfolio and the Environment and Leisure Portfolio respectively. The priorities are set out below, together with responses (in italics) given to Members' queries:

Housing and Community Involvement

- to provide a supply of high quality, social rented housing within the City in light of new Government policy;
- to provide at least 150 new units of affordable housing;
- publish an annual report to tenants which includes the agreed targets within the Local Offers and the Council's performance against these Offers as per the Tenancy Services Authority (TSA) regulatory requirements;
- to review the Neighbourhood Management Policy;
- to work with Devon County Council on how older persons' housing support services are provided in Exeter to tenants in the future;
- to encourage good quality privately rented accommodation whilst recognising the need for managing the impact of HMO's upon established communities; and
- to work pro-actively with all agencies to prevent homelessness and work to support those that are.

- *it was anticipated that the release of private sector accommodation not required for student accommodation would be greater than originally thought;*
- *the kitchen and bathroom replacement programme was now being run by the Contracts Unit and there would be a move towards greater emphasis on giving work to local, smaller companies including individual builders engaged to work on individual void properties; and*
- *the risk of further subsidence affecting properties neighbouring the recently demolished flats at Chestnut Avenue was being monitored by a surveying company. It was hoped to progress replacement build on the site as soon as possible.*

Environment and Leisure

- to open the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in December 2011;
- to enhance the City's parks and play areas;
- to keep the City clean and pleasant for everyone; and
- to minimise waste and build on re-cycling rates.

The fourth sentence in the first bullet point was amended to read "All City Councillors will be invited to an event on 13 December to which two residents from each ward will also be invited."

- *proposed improvement works to the paths in Belmont Park would be funded by either revenue or capital funds depending on the scale of the works, but not from unrelated Section 106 monies;*
- *progress was being made to improve back lane bin collections. For example, residents had been offered choices in respect of domestic waste collection including wheelie bins for a front of house collection or bins provided for storing bags in back yards with seagull resistant bags as an option;*
- *a reduction in newspaper purchase by the general public would be reflected in the recycling figures, however as Devon County Council recycling facilities in Marsh Barton and Pinhoe were not included in City Council figures, the true picture for Exeter would be higher than 37%;*
- *residents of Sylvan Heights would be consulted on proposals for a new play area;*
- *as the Waste Disposal Authority, the County Council had proceeded with an energy from waste plant as the option for Exeter, therefore, a separate collection of food waste would not be a viable proposition now; and*
- *there was no intention of considering the re-introduction of a weekly bin collection currently. A report would be submitted to the next meeting of this Committee on refuse collection issues including incentivisation schemes for waste minimisation.*

The Portfolio Holder had looked in detail at the scheme operating in Windsor and Maidenhead and he outlined why it would not be feasible in Exeter. He confirmed that he was satisfied that plans were in place to minimise disruption to the waste collection service in the event of extreme weather but emphasised that problems could still be anticipated if the weather was similar to that experienced over the 2010 Christmas period. He referred to Devon County Council's plan to grit and clear fewer roads over the winter months and that would be a key issue with regard to safe road access.

Scrutiny Committee – Community noted the reports.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

66 Community Grants 2011/12

The Community Involvement and Inclusion Officer presented the report updating Members on the dispersal of Local Area Community Grants 2011/12. A sum of £27,000, or £1,500 for each ward, has been made available in 2011/12 via Ward Councillors to support groups to deliver community initiatives or towards small capital expenditure projects. There had been a disparity between wards with some areas having received more applications than could be funded and other wards where there had been few applications. £12,785 remained in the overall budget.

It was proposed to send targeted publicity to groups in areas where grant funding was still available and to set a deadline for spending based on remaining ward budgets of 31 December. After this deadline, all unspent money would be put into a single, central pot and promoted again to all groups across the City to be allocated on the basis of first come - first served, regardless of which ward the application comes from. The decision making process would remain the same, that is, Councillors, in the areas where the project would be delivered, would be asked to decide if the project should receive funding. This would effectively redistribute the available funds to areas where there was most need and ensure that the grant funding was fully utilised by the end of this financial year.

Some Members suggested that the deadlines should be extended to 31 January 2012 to provide local groups with more time to apply for remaining funds. Consideration was given to options for distributing remaining funds. A Member suggested that funds could be utilised for projects celebrating the Queen's Jubilee even though these would take place in the next financial year. It was also suggested that the pooled sum remaining could be utilised for a City wide project of public indemnity insurance for events. Parkwatch, who possessed experience in this field, could be requested to administer the remaining funds for this purpose which would be of City wide benefit rather than ward specific.

Scrutiny Committee – Community:-

- (1) noted the report;
- (2) asked that the deadline for the submission of bids from wards for remaining funds be put back from 31 December 2011 to 31 January 2012; and
- (3) requested the submission of an update report to the January meeting of this Committee for further consideration to be given on how to allocate the outstanding funds.

(Report circulated)

67 Repairs Policy for Council Housing

The Acting Head of Housing Services presented the report seeking agreement to implement the amended repairs policy for Council housing setting out how the repairs service would be provided.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the adoption of the amended policy document - Repairs Policy for Council Housing.

(Report circulated)

68 Housing Rechargeable Repairs Policies for Tenanted and Void Properties

The Acting Head of Housing Services presented the report seeking agreement to implement amended policies for rechargeable repairs for both tenanted and void Council properties. There were two distinct policies dealing with rechargeable repairs in tenanted and void properties and, as they were closely connected, the report dealt with them together.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the adoption of the amended policy document - Rechargeable Repairs to Tenanted Properties and Rechargeable Repairs to void properties.

(Report circulated)

69 Impact of Supporting People Funding Cuts by Devon County Council

Councillor Newcombe declared a personal interest as a Member of Devon County Council and Chair of the County Council's People's Scrutiny Committee.

The Acting Head of Housing Services presented the report advising Members of the impact of the cuts made to homelessness services by Devon County Council.

Councillor Newcombe, Chair of the County Council's People's Scrutiny Committee, advised that a County Council Scrutiny task group was to meet to investigate the support of vulnerable people in communities together with the proposed changes to the Supporting People Service and representatives from District Councils and other agencies would be invited to give evidence. She confirmed that both Councillors and officers from District Councils would be invited to attend.

Members expressed grave concern at the potential impact of any further reductions in former Supporting People funding and the possible impact of any new arrangements for how targeted support services are allocated and provided.

Councillor Clark moved and Councillors Branston and Morris seconded the following motion which was passed unanimously:-

Exeter City Council's Scrutiny Committee - Community is extremely concerned about the overall effects for homeless and vulnerable people in Exeter with the loss of 204 supported bed spaces across the City as a result of cuts made by Devon County Council in last year's budget.

The Committee notes that:

1. Housing Associations and charities which provide the accommodation have not been able to sustain their projects without this vital additional funding for support services for people with complex needs. An example is the closure of the Bridge Project, run by Bournemouth Churches Housing Association, which provided 14 units of dispersed accommodation for rough sleepers who were living on the streets.
2. For people presenting as homeless to the City Council, the additional Supporting People budget provided good quality support services, in addition to housing units, which enabled these tenancies to be maintained. This was a vital factor in preventing failure and subsequent repeat homelessness. The

support given to each tenant also enabled them to gain life skills and move onto medium support accommodation.

3. From April 2011, the Supporting People budget has been absorbed into Adult Community Services.
4. Homelessness services in Exeter are now purchased on a spot contract basis with a budget of £112,000.
5. We are concerned that the proposed move to a 'trusted assessor' service to manage the assessment and referral process to providers will create an additional organisation to carry out this function with no additional money, therefore, using money from reduced existing budgets for homelessness.

The Committee believes that it is imperative that this budget is not further reduced in the 2012/13 budget proposals and, indeed, should be increased if another organisation is created to assess need and make referrals.

The Scrutiny Committee - Community therefore resolves that:-

- (1) Councillor J. Hart, the Leader of Devon County Council and Councillor S. Barker, the County Council's Cabinet Member for Social Care, be invited to the next meeting of this Committee to respond to the above issues; and
- (2) this issue be brought to the attention of the two Members of Parliament for Exeter, Ben Bradshaw MP and Hugo Swire MP to make them aware of the Committee's concern.

(Report circulated)

70 **Proposed changes to the Garden Waste Service**

The Head of Environmental Health Service presented the report bringing forward proposals for consideration to improve the efficiency and environmental impact of the garden waste collection service.

A Member suggested that there should be no fixed minimum for garden waste bags and that the public should be permitted to purchase one bag only if they wished. Another Member asked if two people could share the cost of purchasing five bags and present the bags at one registered address. The Head of Environmental Health Services advised that a minimum limit had to be set in order to avoid the need for frequent visits along a road where only one bag had been purchased. He confirmed that many existing customers shared the cost and shared a garden waste bin presented from one address. For those who did not wish to purchase five bags, or could not share, another option would be to compost any green waste in their gardens.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the proposed changes to the garden waste service as set out in the report.

(Report circulated)

PERFORMANCE MONITORING

71 **Risk Management**

The Head of Environmental Health Services presented the report advising Members of the risks identified relating to its areas and of the action taken and proposed to mitigate the risks concerned.

Scrutiny Committee - Community:-

- (1) noted the risks relating to its areas; and
- (2) supported ongoing monitoring to ensure that the risk register remains current and risk assessments are valid and that the proposed mitigating action is taken by the agreed target dates.

(Report circulated)

72 **Report on Year One of the new Leisure Management Contract with Parkwood Leisure**

Councillor Mottram declared a personal and prejudicial interest and left the meeting during consideration of this matter as his company undertook work for Parkwood Leisure.

Councillor Morris declared a personal interest as her husband holds Leisure Centre membership with Parkwood Leisure.

The Head of Contracts and Direct Services presented the report on the first year of performance of the new Leisure Management Contract with Parkwood Leisure.

A Member referred to a number of complaints in respect of the Riverside Leisure Centre which indicated that the level of service was not up to standard. She requested that customer comments on the Leisure Centres be made available as part of further reports to this Committee. Another Member suggested that a working group be set up to scrutinise the operation of the contract and to make unannounced visits to the Centres. The Head of Contracts and Direct Services advised that an unannounced inspection had taken place during the recent school half term. Cleanliness standards had been found to be acceptable and he commented on steps taken to resolve problems associated with parking at Wonford Sports Centre. Steps had been taken to prevent hospital staff using the car park and the Chestnut Children's Centre had been consulted on a new parking system. It was noted that the County Council were proposing a traffic management scheme to improve traffic flow in and out of the car parking areas around the Riverside Leisure Centre and the new Marks and Spencer's Store.

Members noted that any in-depth scrutiny of the operation of the Centres would require a full understanding of a large and complex contract including familiarisation with the individual contractual requirements. In response to a Member, who suggested that questionnaires could be circulated to Leisure Centre members to obtain feedback, the Head of Contracts and Direct Services advised that Parkwood already operated a feedback system which had been improved following suggestions from Council officers. He stated that some data was not available in a completed annual format for the first year of operation and that it would not be possible to make

comparisons between this data and information held on the previous contract so trends will only start to become visible in the second year of the contract.

The Chair suggested that regular reports should be made to this Committee in the same way as the reports on the Housing Digest with a Member Briefing as another possible option. The Head of Contracts and Direct Services advised that, should the Committee wish to invite a representative of Parkwood to discuss issues, a representative at operational level rather than a regional director would be more appropriate.

Scrutiny Committee – Community:-

- (1) noted the report;
- (2) requested that appropriate representatives be invited to attend a Member Briefing to update Members on progress on the operation of the contract;
- (3) requested the submission of further reports to future meetings of this Committee on the performance of Parkwood, their representatives to be invited to attend the meetings; and
- (4) Members submit any questions on the performance of Parkwood prior to the meeting in order for advance notice to be provided.

(Report circulated)

73 Half Year Results of Performance Monitoring 2011/12

The Director Community and Environment advised Members of performance in the middle of the year on a range of services across the Directorate.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

74 Housing Revenue Account Stewardship to September 2011

The Director Community and Environment advised Members of any major differences by management unit to the outturn forecast for the first six months of the financial year up to 30 September 2011. During this period, the total of the variances indicated that there would be a net surplus of £154,130 which would be transferred to the working balance as at 31 March 2012. This represented a reduction of £345,260 compared to the budgeted reduction to the working balance of £499,390. It was estimated that the working balance would stand at £3,570,681 at 31 March 2012.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

75 **Community Services Stewardship to September 2011**

The Director Community and Environment advised Members of any major differences by management unit to the revised budget.

The current forecast suggested that net expenditure for this Committee would decrease from the revised budget by a total of £228,550, which represented a variation of 2.1% from the revised budget.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.50 pm

Chair