

SCRUTINY RESOURCES COMMITTEE
23 NOVEMBER 2011

Key Elements of the Programme for the Resources Portfolio for 2011/12

- **Business Transformation**

Local government is under attack by Tory Ministers, who for ideological reasons want to dismantle local government. I believe city council services for Exeter should normally be provided by Exeter city council officers, not by the private sector or workers from other councils. However, our present structure is more than a decade old and is not fit for delivering those services in the 21st Century.

Following the restructuring of the senior management of the council and the development of a new organisational structure it is essential that we ensure that the new organisation adopts and operates efficient, cost effective and customer-led processes. This means a transformation of the way we currently operate. Proposals will be brought forward for a fundamental review of the way services operate. As Portfolio Holder for Business Transformation I will take the lead in this process. It is important that all my councillor colleagues are involved in this process, though I hope members of this committee will take a particular interest.

***UPDATE:** A significant amount of work was undertaken during the summer months by senior and front-line staff to gather data on the processes, procedures and outcomes for service delivery across a range of service areas. This has helped identify where the Council should start its review of all services so work can begin in earnest on the detailed review of processes once the recruitment to the senior management structure has been undertaken.*

- **Human Resources**

Although the Leader takes responsibility for HR in the time of enormous budget reductions and staff restructure, he does so in consultation with this Portfolio Holder. I have chaired one meeting of the Employee Liaison Forum (ELF) when the Leader was on other business. I attend the South West Employers' Forum on behalf of Exeter City Council. I will be interviewing, with other Senior Councillors, for the new management posts.

- **Customer Access**

To provide convenient, easy access to services there is a programme of providing 24 hour access via our website and our automated telephone payments service. However, there still remains a demand for customers to visit our Customer Service Centre outside of normal office hours. I have asked officers to look at options for opening the Centre on Saturday mornings. Already there have been early discussions with staff and a review is underway of current opening arrangements and costs to explore this further.

***UPDATE:** An important milestone in making our services more accessible was reached in September when we began the trial opening of the Customer Service Centre on Saturday mornings. This gives people who don't have ready access to on-line services or who work Monday to Friday the chance to visit or telephone our Customer Service staff.*

- **Housing/Council Tax Benefit**

There continues to be a growing demand for this vital service and our first priority is to continue to ensure that we provide a timely and effective service to current and future claimants. Caseload continues to grow at about 5% a year and staffing resources have not been increased yet our processing times have continued to fall.

Already there have been cuts to Housing Benefit. However, major changes have been indicated. The government's proposals for Universal Credit mean that from the autumn of 2013, only claimants already receiving housing benefit will continue to receive this service from the Council. All new claimants will have the housing element of their benefits paid for in Universal Credit, with housing benefit being phased out over a number of years. Council Tax benefit will cease on 1 April 2013 and every council has to design its own scheme for delivering this element of the benefit system while achieving a 10% reduction in the gross cost of the current scheme.

These are huge changes to come to terms with in a very short period of time and the proposals for council tax benefits raises significant issues of having to design a local scheme and avoid a potential huge financial risk for the council. At the present time, government has not provided the information needed to plan for these massive challenges. I will be working with officers to prepare for these changes and to bring proposals back to Members so we can start to understand the issues and challenges we face.

***UPDATE:** Despite there continuing to be an increasing demand for these services, the processing of new claims and changes continues to be ahead of target with new claims being assessed on average during the last month within 10 days and changes within 6 days. Many housing benefit claimants who have not changed their circumstances since April will feel the full effect of this year's benefit reductions in January when their protection ends. Work continues with landlords and individual claimants to try and ensure that everyone is aware of the effect this will have and to provide help where possible.*

It is hoped that the government will shortly respond to the consultation responses it received in respect of its proposal to localise council tax benefit from 1 April 2013. This will mean that hundreds of local authorities like Exeter will have to design their own scheme for providing this national benefit and take the financial consequences if expenditure throughout the year exceeds the annual government grant. Nationally, the budget for this benefit is being cut by 10% but as the government has stated that all claimants over 60 will be fully protected, this means that working age claimants in the City will be facing something like an 18% cut to balance the budget. If we are told to protect further groups of people, the cut to those of working age will need to be even more severe.

- **Information Technology**

No modern organisation can operate effectively without an efficient use of IT to provide service support and delivery and we have been fortunate that in previous years we have had the resources to invest in the robust systems we currently have. Things will be much more difficult in the future, yet the need for systems development will be even greater as we look to modernise and automate processes. I want to make sure that the review of the council's processes considers fully the opportunities modern communications technology offer, but that investment requires a sound business case to ensure that payback is achieved. One example of this is electronic forms which automatically process data into our back office systems.

UPDATE:

RAMM – the new museum will rely heavily on new technologies including:

- new telephone and call management system;
- new data networks, to enable the interactive displays, environmental controls systems, back office systems and public access via wireless network;
- high speed data links to the Ark.

eForms - all Council eForms have now been reviewed and being put into a standard format to aid accessibility, more interactive forms are being developed to improve customer service. Currently working with Housing to look at access via Smart phones and assess customers' preference for contact – particularly around repairs.

Servers – demand for capacity continues to grow; now holding over 3 million documents, this year's upgrade programme will keep pace with this increasing demand. The migration from some of the remaining older or 'legacy' systems and hardware is underway; this will move all systems onto the most current operating systems and platforms.

Virtualised Desktops – alternative ways of delivering the traditional 5 year PC replacement programme will be trialled next year, based on lower cost 'thin client' desktops. This could provide a more flexible and higher performing desktop platform with the 'computing power' being provided direct from our servers rather than the pc itself. If the trials prove successful then the deployment will be extended and used as a part of future replacement programmes.

- **Civic Centre Accommodation**

In the past two years the Council has seen its staffing reduce by some 20% and this is clear from the utilisation of office space within the Civic Centre. This provides an opportunity to review the allocation of accommodation in light of the forthcoming organisational review and I will be looking to release space which can be let to generate much needed income. Clearly, it will be helpful to have in mind where it would be most beneficial to let any surplus capacity, so I will be considering the options in the near future so that we are ready when the opportunity presents itself and nothing is done in the intervening period which might prejudice our options.

UPDATE: Work continues to adjust accommodation requirements in response to the overall reduction in staffing levels. Once the senior management appointments are made, work will commence to align services into their new configurations. Another important objective of this project will be to declare an element of accommodation at the Civic Centre as surplus so that the Council can let it on a commercial basis to help mitigate budget cuts.

- **Procurement / Health and Safety / Equalities**

I will be spending some time in the coming months familiarising myself with the Council's procurement and Health and Safety arrangements. Procurement is an area under great pressure as resources diminish and I'm keen to review the arrangements we have in place to ensure best value. I have asked for an update on the 'Green Accord' to come to this committee in September. I am attending groups that are consulted in the health and safety process and visiting council departments where there are the greatest risks to see how our policies protect our workers.

UPDATE:

Procurement

Progress with the Green Accord has been reported to this committee and will be return for a review early in 2012. Unfortunately, the significant engagement reported to the Committee by the Head of Contracts and Direct Services has not yet materialised. This does mean that careful scrutiny of the scheme's financial performance is undertaken as it is supposed to provide a significant revenue contribution to the Council. I have been updated on current procurement procedures across the authority in preparation for assisting in the establishment of a new regime for procurement in the new structure.

Equalities

I have attended a meeting of the Corporate Equality Group and am now on the circulation list of the committee agendas and minutes to keep updated on current issues. The largest contemporary issue was the Equality Impact Assessment of the restructure.

Health and Safety

I have attended the annual Regional Health and Safety Forum. I have a attended a corporate health and safety committee and will remain on the circulation list. I observed an inspection of the weighbridge at Exton Road. I have a Health and Safety tour of the MRF calendared. I appear in the forthcoming Citizen highlighting safety issues for all Council customer-facing staff. I participated in the first session of the latest Stepaway Personal safety training with CSC and cleansing staff. I will press for the Director/Assistant Director who takes responsibility for staff safety to similarly attend the next available course to re-emphasise our corporate commitment to staff safety.

Councillor Ian Martin
Portfolio Holder, Business Transformation and Human Resources
November 2011