

PUBLIC QUESTIONS RECEIVED for Place Scrutiny Committee – 8 September 2016

Question for Place Scrutiny Committee From Mike Walton - Exeter Cycling Campaign

"Given the importance of Exeter's open spaces to the health and wellbeing of our citizens and the imperative of getting more people to cycle across the city as a means of addressing our challenges of pollution, congestion & unhealthy lifestyles,

- 1. will the Council guarantee that in their plans for the future of Exeter's green spaces they will ensure continued and improving access for people, particularly people on bicycles, scooters and wheelchairs**
- 2. and will mandate an annual, public, report to the Council on how greater access for people using bicycles is being delivered"**

Response by Councillor Rachel Sutton, Portfolio Holder for City Development on behalf of Councillor Philip Bialyk Portfolio Holder Sport and Health and Well Being

Councillor Rachel Sutton as Portfolio Holder for City Development responded to the question as Councillor Philp Bialyk was unable to attend the meeting as he had already agreed to attend another Council engagement. She confirmed that the Council valued its public green spaces for the enjoyment of all citizens, ensuring that these green spaces remained safe and accessible for a wide variety of users of all ages was of paramount importance, and something that the Council would safeguard.

The importance of green spaces as venues to visit and enjoy for leisure, exercise and social activities was fully recognised, as is their importance in providing transport links for cycling. The Portfolio Holder for Sport and Health and Wellbeing, Councillor Bialyk, had prioritised the following actions for 2016:-

- Improve cycle routes and provide more cycle parking*
- Continue working with partners to make Exeter the most active city in the South West by 2018*

Details of how this would be delivered and measured were being developed across the city, including Exeter's greenspaces, by the City Council and its partners. Councillor Bialyk would be reporting on the progress and programming of these linked priorities for 2016/17, which would be published. The Exeter Cycle Campaign would also be kept informed.

A Member reminded the Scrutiny Committee about the excellent contribution already made by the established Exeter cycling route.

Question for Place Scrutiny Committee From Lynn Wetenhall, for Ludwell Life Steering Group

The proposed transfer of the Valley Parks to DWT, whilst having many attractions which Ludwell Life is supportive of, also inevitably means a loss of public control and a 'democratic deficit', through the handing over of a large and significant public asset to a charity, away from a democratically accountable local authority. Exeter City

Council has approved a Community Strategy which underlines "the importance of the views and actions of communities, when making policy and delivering actions".

We therefore ask:

"Will the council ensure that as part of the negotiated deal and conditions that DWT is obliged to provide a transparent, accessible and standing means by which members of the public and interest groups can input their views and have a dialogue and influence, about valley park issues on a regular basis? This would be over and above the general talk of 'engagement' in the report before you, and would be a specific, named process with appropriate structures, (eg User Group, Forum of interest groups etc) that would give groups like ours, and the many other interested stakeholder groups and members of the public who care passionately about the valley parks, reassurance that the publically accountable aspect of the current management regime would not be entirely lost.

We believe that any such process and associated structures, as well as going some way to reduce the loss of public accountability and control (via voting, council policy etc), and complying with the spirit of the Community Strategy, could only be of benefit to DWT, given both the considerable changes to the parks which will have to be explained and managed, and the huge amount of experience, expertise and good will that stakeholders have in relation to the valley parks.

We hope that the committee will agree that such a requirement makes sense and will recommend to the Executive Committee."

Response Response by Councillor Rachel Sutton, Portfolio Holder for City Development on behalf of Councillor Rob Hannaford, Portfolio Holder Place

Councillor Rachel Sutton as Portfolio Holder for City Development responded to the question as Councillor Rob Hannaford was unable to attend the meeting as he had already agreed to attend another Council engagement. She welcomed the support of Ludwell Life and the proposals to transfer Exeter's Valley Parks to the Devon Wildlife Trust, as well as their enthusiasm and passion and hoped that their contribution would continue long into the future to help keep the city's open spaces special.

She acknowledged that leasehold transfer was a fairly blunt instrument with which to mitigate the loss of public accountability. The City Council would do its best to ensure that as part of the negotiated deal and conditions that the Devon Wildlife Trust provided a conduit by which the community, including organisations and groups such as Ludwell Life could input their views and have a regular dialogue about valley park issues. She was certain that local councillors would keep a close eye and also regularly review as part of their ward.

A Member commented on the work of the Devon Wild life Trust in helping to preserve the wildlife and fauna in the Ludwell valley Park.

A Member commented on the process for making this proposal known to the public.

Ms Wetenhall responded to the reply and understood there would be accountability through the local Members of the City Council, but still made a plea to ensure there was the opportunity for dialogue with members of the public and interest groups.

Question for Place Scrutiny Committee

Diana Moore

Chair, Exeter Community Forum

Experience from councils across the UK, supported by work and evidence from the Treasury, LGA and community sector, has shown the role of transfer of ownership of land or buildings from a statutory body to a community organisation at 'less than best consideration' can achieve a public benefit for social, environmental and economic benefit. One of the key lessons learned from this work is that a "strategic approach within the local authority provides for transparency, ensures consistency, and enhances the authority's asset management Capability". Section 7 of the report to this committee suggests that Exeter City Council's approach to asset transfer would be enhanced by such a clear approach to policy on asset transfer. The Council signed up to the principles of community development in the Community Development Strategy in April this year, this strategy also highlights that 'it would be useful to increase clarity' on this matter of asset transfer.

Would the Committee recommend to the Executive to work as a matter of priority to progress the action point in that agreed strategy to "work with community and voluntary organisations to agree and implement a single policy and process for transferring land, buildings and other assets to community ownership or management or both and access to appropriate support and training to officers and organisations going through the process"?

Response by Councillor Paul Bull, Portfolio Holder Communities and Neighbourhoods

Councillor Paul Bull, as Portfolio Holder for Communities and Neighbourhoods, responded to the question. He referred to a widely attended public engagement event at the Corn Exchange in February 2014, asking community groups and other stakeholder to help us review how we looked at using our Parks and Open Spaces. As a result, Devon Wildlife Trust came forward with an 'in principle' expression of interest on taking on the Valley Parks, and this approach was considered in a report that went through the Committee cycle, including Executive in 2014, where the principle of asset transfer to community organisations was endorsed.

The Council recognised that successful, sustainable asset transfer was dependent upon timing and opportunity, with the pace driven by the community, not the Council. At that time it was anticipated that the transfers referred to in the report, including that to Devon Wildlife Trust, could take place relatively swiftly, without the need to develop policies and procedures. However, since then the Community Development Strategy has been developed which highlighted the need for clarity on asset transfer.

Councillor Bull stated that he would be very pleased to recommend to Executive that a policy on transferring land, buildings and other assets to community ownership or management be developed. The timing of this piece of work would need to be considered amongst other priorities for the council but he would meet will meet with the relevant Officers to discuss a realistic timescale to develop it.

Ms Moore thanked Councillor Bull for the reply and referred to their work as part of the Exeter Community Forum Steering Group. The action plan in the community strategy recommend training and support for both community organisations and officers to support both thorough the asset transfer process and she advised that the Exeter Community Forum would look forward to working with the Council to develop this work.

A Member commented on the process for making this issue known to the public.