

PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday 5 September 2019

Present:

Councillor Vizard (Chair)
Councillors Wardle, Begley, Foggin, Moore, J, Pattison and Quance, I

Apologies:

Councillors Oliver and Pierce

Also present:

Director (BA), Service Lead Housing Needs & Homelessness, Deputy Chief Finance Officer
and Democratic Services Officer

In Attendance:

Councillor Emma Morse - Portfolio Holder for Supporting People

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MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings of People Scrutiny Committee held on 6 and 26 June 2019 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

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DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests were made.

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QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER 19

No questions were received from members of the public.

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QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL UNDER STANDING ORDER 20

No questions were received from Members.

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HRA 2019/20 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT - QUARTER I

The Deputy Chief Finance Officer advised Members of any major differences, by management unit between the approved budget and the outturn forecast for the first three months of the financial year up to 30 June 2019 in respect of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and the Council's new build schemes. An outturn update in respect of the HRA Capital Programme was also incorporated in the report in order to help provide a comprehensive financial update in respect of the Housing Revenue Account.

During this period, the total budget variances indicated that there would be a net deficit of £1,453,485 in 2019/20. This represented a movement of £117,070 compared to the revised budgeted deficit of £1,336,415 for 2019/20.

The total amount of HRA capital expenditure for 2019/20 showed a total forecast spend of £22,782,365 compared to the £26,843,000 approved programme, a decrease of £4,060,635.

The Service Lead Housing Assets advised that changing the Kitchen and Bathroom re-furbishment contract from a direct reward to competitive tendering had resulted in a three month slippage and that demolition of the Laings properties would commence on conclusion of negotiations with South West Water on drainage easements. He responded to Members' queries:-

- the engagement process with Rennes House tenants on the renewal of the lifts would be repeated for the wider refurbishment of the blocks the design team shortly to finalise plans;
- kitchen and bathroom re-furbishment contracts included wide-ranging Contract Conditions including workmanship and performance requirements which were monitored by the Assets Surveyors. Inspections were undertaken when concerns were raised in respect of workmanship and contractors were required to repeat work if quality and competency were unacceptable.

People Scrutiny Committee noted the report and requested Executive and Council to note and approve:-

- (1) the HRA forecast financial position for 2019/20 financial year; and
- (2) the revision of the HRA Capital Programme to reflect the reported variations as detailed in the report.

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HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY ACTION PLAN UPDATE

The Service Lead Housing Needs and Homelessness presented the report providing Members with an overview of the Council's updated action plan for the 2016-2021 Homelessness Strategy. The action plan sets out ambitious targets over the next two years, building on work already carried out over the past three years. In the last 18 months the City Council had attracted £2 million in new funds to help tackle rough sleeping and homelessness in the city.

Exeter City Council had a mandatory duty to have a current Homelessness Strategy in place (renewable within a maximum of every 5 years) with reviewable actions plans across all client groups including specific actions to tackle rough sleeping. Full consultation in preparation for a new three year Exeter Homelessness Strategy 2021-2023 would begin in Autumn 2020.

The report highlighted Council and partner targets looking to be delivered over the next two years. The action plan had identified the following areas as priorities:-

- Section 1 - Preventing Homelessness;
- Section 2 - Reducing youth homelessness in Exeter;
- Section 3 - Reducing Rough Sleeping in Exeter;
- Section 4 - Focus on Priority Groups;
- Section 5 - Improve access to Private Rented Sector;

- Section 6 - Optimising use of temporary emergency accommodation; and
- Section 7- (yet to be developed) strategic planning around initiatives such as joint strategic needs analysis, general sector mapping and gap analysis, joint funding and alliance commissioning, further digitalisation and shared services/out-sourcing options.

Officers responded to a number of questions from Members on this pressing issue:-

- funding had facilitated two full time prison navigators as only 28% of prisoners released from HMP Exeter as being of no fixed abode were provided with temporary accommodation, the situation exacerbated by a reduction in sentence length. Exeter was part of the Devon and Cornwall Short Term Prisoner Re-settlement Group developing best practice;
- rough sleeping numbers varied with 25-30 estimated at any one time although recent months had returned counts of 15-16. The total homeless figure, which included those living in temporary accommodation, hostels etc., was approximately 1,200. Over the last 10 years homelessness had increased nationally and in Exeter although the rough sleeping numbers in Exeter had reduced in recent years as a result of a number of initiatives;
- in addition to those presenting themselves at Customer First, the homeless were identified through officer contact and other outreach workers and through referral from prison, hospitals etc. If in priority need, the Council had a duty to offer interim accommodation and then accommodation which should be reasonable and suitable for a tenancy of at least for 12 months. Because of complexity of needs, reluctance of some to engage and being street attached, fear of peer groups who may be in hostels and those who were homed but begged during the day, complete cessation of rough sleeping was difficult to achieve. To counter negative perceptions that this situation engendered, a communications strategy was being developed such as clearer reporting and good news stories;
- the Exeter homeless count was thorough and, notwithstanding Government criteria, included those in tents and those with sleeping bags but not bedded down. Where the former were on Council owned land, a three strikes and out policy was followed;
- with the funding time limited, in order to maintain/improve identified programmes, it was anticipated that partner agencies would pool resources. Potential sources for further support/funding were the Exeter Homeless Partnership, closer partnership working initiatives with Devon County Council integrating health, social care and housing and further bids to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG);
- St. Petrocks administered the Social Lettings Agency initiative with six landlords recently added, one of whom with a potential 30 properties;
- trauma amongst ex-forces personnel was a significant element. Devon Partnership Trust provided mental health/psychological interventions and SSAFA and the Royal British Legion were also supportive;
- a governance structure would be explored to form a Homeless Reduction Board with potential involvement from the County Council, Public Health and the Devon Partnership Trust;
- the winter shelter run by the Julian House and Bournemouth Churches Housing Association would open on 1 October until 31 March 2020. Whilst preference was given to citizens with an Exeter area origin the Association did not operate a stringent local connection criteria. Housing Option Appraisals with the home local authority were undertaken for those originating from the rest of the UK to identify credible options to return. Exeter's night shelter service was well known nationally amongst this cohort. A number of Devon authorities did not operate night shelters;

- focus Groups were held with statutory and voluntary services, the commercial sector and the University as part of the joined up approach to deliver the programmes through multi-agency partnership working, led in most cases by the City Council. Actions were regularly reviewed and would change when shared more widely across relevant partners.

The Portfolio Holder for Supporting People emphasised the short term nature of the current funding and for the need for continued and robust action to tackle this entrenched problem.

The Portfolio Holder, Chair and Members thanked the officers for their hard work and commitment in this area.

(The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.34 pm)

Chair

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