

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
(HELD AS A VIRTUAL MEETING)

3 December 2020

Present:

Councillor Matthew Vizard (Chair)

Councillors Mitchell, M, Foggin, Mrs Henson, Mitchell, K, Oliver, Martin, A, Quance, Sparkes, Wardle and Warwick

Also present:

Director Net Zero Exeter & City Management, Director Communications, Culture & Leisure Facilities, Active & Healthy People Programme Lead, Democratic Services Officer (HB) and Democratic Services Officer (SLS)

In attendance:

Councillor Amal Ghusain	- Portfolio Holder for Communities & Culture
Councillor David Harvey	- Portfolio Holder for City Management

27 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 8 October 2020 were taken as read, approved as correct, for signing by the Chair at the earliest possible convenience.

28 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

29 Questions from the Public under Standing Order No. 19

No questions from members of the public were received.

30 Questions from Members on Covid-19 Recovery reports from Portfolio Holders and Answers

The Chair invited the two Portfolio Holders to present their respective briefing notes.

Questions from Members submitted in advance of the meeting with the answers given at the meeting together with the supplementary questions and answers made at the meeting are set out below for each Portfolio.

Portfolio Holder for City Management - Councillor Harvey - in presenting his briefing note highlighted the following:-

- the focus was on maintaining services through flexible staff levels to ensure that the more vulnerable areas are covered with many measures having been put in place before the Covid-19 pandemic; and
- Government guidelines have been adhered to, for example by closing and re-opening play and skate parks with staff responding to public queries.

Questions from Members of the Committee

- 1 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - *Thank you for the update within the report regarding COVID measures implemented within the Waste, Recycling and Fleet service. Can the Portfolio Holder or an officer please confirm similar COVID measures have occurred within the Materials Recycling Facility (MRF) e.g. social distancing, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), ensuring adequate ventilation and adequate COVID safe break facilities/increased drinks breaks due to the presumed use of masks?*

Similar measures were completed in the MRF including but not limited to, face masks and PPE, social distancing, increased hand washing facilities, staggering of break times to enable social distancing. These were all in line with Government guidance on factories and a Covid-19 safe risk assessment was produced in conjunction with our health and safety teams and Unison.

- 2 **Councillor K. Mitchell** – *Can the Portfolio Holder or an officer update the Committee on how the pandemic has impacted upon the revenue we receive from our recyclables and whether any contracts have changed meaning our recyclables are being sent elsewhere?*

Revenue has gone down as the global demand for recyclable materials dropped but we are still using our usual processors and no changes have been made.

Only those processors who can provide an audit trail on the use of the materials are used. One example of a recent change has been the dispatch of cardboard for re-cycling to France rather than China.

Supplementary question and answer.

Will Brexit impact on the ability to send material for re-cycling to Europe?

We are not expecting an impact on the ability to send recyclable materials to Europe. We send very little to Europe as we mostly use UK based re-processors. A few items such as fishnets collected through the Ocean Recovery Project from ports and beach cleans go to Europe (in this case to Denmark) but we are working with UK companies to encourage them to enhance their facilities to accept this materials.

Devon Local Authorities work together through the Devon Waste Partnership and Government has been lobbied to support locally based re-cycling plants.

- 3 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - *Can the Portfolio Holder or an officer update the Committee on the progress or any delays with regard to the planned implementation of food and glass doorstep collections, which was originally due to be implemented in the summer of next year?*

As I am sure you know the complete change of a waste collection and recycling service is extremely complex with many interdependencies. Since the Executive report which approved the changes we have been researching the options available to us and how they might work in an urban environment. We have reached out to our more rural neighbours to learn from their experiences in terms of operational performance, localised impact on traffic and the feedback from residents.

We have been in detailed conversations with vehicle manufacturers regarding suitable specifications and we have explored their programmes to introduce electric alternatives. The market for electric vehicles is moving more slowly than we would like but it's important that we integrate vehicle delivery with the new charging facilities offered by the solar array, battery storage and direct wire to Exton Road. The timing of the charging facilities and any vehicle deliveries is key.

Our MRF team have been working with manufacturers to come up with a range of detailed technical specifications for the MRF processing equipment. Examining the most modern and efficient equipment available and configuring it to fit into the limited space in the existing building. All of this whilst trying to continue to allow the residents to recycle the widest variety of materials at their doorstep.

Covid-19 has lengthened manufacturing times for vehicles and machinery but perhaps more importantly it has changed the way people shop and the quantities of what they recycle. This too has to be factored into the collection regime to make sure we don't build in inefficiency from day one. As we are a waste collection authority and not the disposal authority we have to make sure that our collection regime fits into the Devon Wide disposal arrangements.

So this project has a great deal of complexity and interdependencies. The work so far has raised concerns that kerb side sort may not be the most suitable system for Exeter and the team are researching other systems which offer the collection of food waste and glass at the kerbside but potentially offer greater possibilities for the use of electric vehicles and increase the carbon savings offered by the proposal. Once this review is complete and should any changes be proposed a paper will come back through the proper channels.

Supplementary question and answer.

Does it remain the intention for regular updates on the doorstep collection service to be submitted to this Committee?

The Chair confirmed that it remained the intention to report regularly on this issue to the Committee.

In response to a question, Members were advised that there were a number of options within a co-mingling service and that one issue was to decide which were the most appropriate vehicles for collection. Smaller vehicles lent themselves more readily to electrification as they were cheaper than larger electrified vehicles.

- 4 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - *When does the Portfolio Holder envisage that the full graffiti removal service can be re-instated?*

At the start of the new financial year.

Supplementary question and answer.

With a notable recent increase in graffiti in the Pennsylvania Road area, will the Council review its online system for reporting such incidents? At present

there is insufficient space on the web page for photos of such incidents to be adequately presented.

This will be raised with Strata and the Communications Team.

Whilst noting that it was the intention for the full service to resume, Members acknowledged that the huge financial pressures brought about by the pandemic prevented an expansion of the service although every effort was being made to respond as flexibly as possible across all services.

Members discussed wider issues around graffiti, one Member stating that, whilst graffiti could often be offensive to many, it did also provide the opportunity for the disenfranchised to express view as well as being considered by some to be an art form. Another Member referred to the potential for graffiti to promote conspiracy theories as well as racism, sexism etc.

The Director Net Zero & City Management advised that he would discuss the issue of interpreting and defining whether graffiti was offensive with the cleansing team. He also clarified that it was not possible for communities to hire cleaning materials because of the use of hazardous chemicals and of the need for training.

The Chair suggested that this issue could be a topic for a Task and Finish Group.

Portfolio Holder Communities and Culture - Councillor Ghusain – in presented her briefing note highlighted the following:-

- the four main elements within the communities part of the portfolio were Wellbeing Exeter, Exeter Connect, Exeter CAB and Grants; and
- the culture section of the portfolio largely focussed on RAMM where a rich offering of activities continued to be provided. Other areas of culture within the city such as at the Custom House, Northcott Theatre, the Phoenix, Visit Exeter and In Exeter bore witness to the positive community response by this sector to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Questions from Members of the Committee

- 1 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - *In view of the excellent work the RAMM are already undertaking in regard to online engagement, could they act as a hub partner for other heritage and visitor attractions within the city? This could help present a more holistic view of what makes Exeter so special.*

We are incredibly proud of the digital engagement RAMM has done during the pandemic. We will of course continue to work with our partners in the heritage and cultural sector. Other cultural offers in the city were being delivered on line, with RAMM particularly pro-active in publicising its offer.

- 2 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - *What formal audit or survey does the Council intend to undertake to ascertain the most successful elements of the work undertaken by Exeter Community Wellbeing?*

Exeter Connect, the Council's Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) infrastructure support partner, commissioned this learning

report following the first lockdown. Many of the insights and learning from this report have been adopted and improved the platform for the second national lockdown period. Power BI digital platform reporting provides daily intelligence on call themes and outcomes for residents, which officers use to ensure the right support offer is in place for residents.

Weekly meetings are held to assess data collected as part of Exeter Wellbeing, broken down geographically and by issue with outcomes also provided. This data helps inform the service offered going forward.

Supplementary question and answer.

In the event of a third lockdown, will the service continue to cope?

Yes. Exeter Wellbeing was established before the pandemic and therefore responded very effectively to the first lockdown, continuing to do so for the second lockdown and taking on board lessons learnt from the former. The work of local community and mutual aid groups is also much valued.

- 3 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - *With regard to Digital Inclusion, this IT initiative relates to primary aged school children, what support, if any, is being provided for children in the 11-16 age range?*

At present, the Council is not providing any direct support to this age group. The Education strand of the City Recovery Plan is identifying priorities in this area, Primary School aged children were identified as the key initial priority to focus on.

This strand is part of the Build Exeter Back Better initiative driven by the Liveable Exeter Place Board and includes representatives from educational institutions in the city. Whilst the City Council does not have direct responsibility for education it is contributing to the initiatives such as the goal of providing 1,500 digital devices to households most in need. The Ted Wragg Trust has created a digital library for use by schools.

Supplementary question and answer.

With the Government announcement of changes to be made to GCE and A levels from next summer can it be guaranteed that this will not further exacerbate the inequalities that exist for students to access digital learning?

It is a priority aim of all partners within the Liveable Exeter Place Board to ensure that the digital gap is bridged.

- 4 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - *Is it intended that a more detailed analysis will be presented regarding the allocation and effectiveness of the funds distributed via Covid Community Grants and the Covid Wellbeing Support Fund?*

This will need to be discussed with relevant grants panels and key officers as to the level of information that is relevant and appropriate for Members. An evaluation of the grants made available to community groups in the first lockdown is available on our website : <https://exeter.gov.uk/media/5269/covid-19-community-action-fund-report-080920.pdf> .

The Council's grant scheme was suspended with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and replaced with the Covid-19 Emergency Action Fund which will

continue during this crisis. It provides rapid financial support to communities to help them through the lockdowns and the tier restrictions. All support is subject to the submission by recipients of evaluation reports setting out the outcomes and impact on their communities.

Responding to a Member's request for clarification, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that all community grants were scrutinised in detail and that it was a requirement for all applicants to be properly constituted. It was noted that Exeter Wellbeing provided quarterly reports on the grants issued.

- 5 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - *To what extent does the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) programme and Exeter Connect work with Exeter Home Call as it can be assumed that there is a large client overlap?*

Programme information regarding Exeter Community Wellbeing and its response work through Exeter Connect is cascaded across council services and communities to enable residents to access support. There is specific support for CEVs and during Lockdown 1 direct communication was sent to residents identifying the support available and how to contact. Future targeted work for specific communities will depend on a range of issues such as levels of restrictions and direct support for CEVs.

During the lockdowns, all CEV's were contacted by both the Government and the Council, the latter providing a specific offer of directing individuals to community connectors. Referrals were also made through the city's GP surgeries as it was believed that some 40% of those contacting their GP were in respect of non-medical issues such as isolation and loneliness. The community connectors would visit the individuals to provide necessary support. Exeter Home Call similarly refer individuals to connectors with the offer of digital services identified as one area of support which would be beneficial to many.

Members recognised the value of integration between various services and it was commented that the letters from both the Government and the Council were particularly clear and informative.

- 6 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - *There is likely to be a very large increase in the workload of Exeter Citizens Advice in 2021. What additional funding and/or staffing does the existing Team envisage is required to sustain the service through 2021?*

At present the Council is committed to the three year contract in place with Exeter Citizens Advice (CAB). Regular monthly dialogue is being held with the service to plan for the future and identify priority areas to support residents throughout the winter into 2021 and beyond.

CAB, which was funded by, amongst others, both the City and County Councils, had issued a press release to confirm the continuation of its service with its staff and volunteers home working to continue to offer free advice to clients.

Supplementary question and answer.

With the rise in unemployment caused by the pandemic which is likely to be exacerbated by the collapse of the retail sector, will CAB require a "taskforce" to cope with the anticipated increase in demand for its services?

The Council is in regular dialogue with CAB and will continue to support the service which will evolve in coming months in response to the anticipated increase in the demand for its services.

A Member remarked that the changes to the Universal Credit in support of the unemployed and working families were inadequate and that even the latter required additional support.

The Chair, Portfolio Holders and Committee Members asked that their thanks be passed on to staff for their commitment, hard work and significant efforts during the current crisis.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.57 pm

Chair