

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
(HELD AS A VIRTUAL MEETING)

1 April 2021

Present:

Councillor Matthew Vizard (Chair)
Councillors Mitchell, M, Foggin, Mrs Henson, Mitchell, K, Oliver, Quance, Sparkes, Wardle and Warwick

Apologies:

Councillor Martin

Also present:

Deputy Chief Executive, Director Net Zero Exeter & City Management, Active & Healthy People Programme Lead, Democratic Services Officer (HB) and Democratic Services Officer (SLS)

In attendance:

Councillor David Harvey	- Portfolio Holder for City Management
Councillor Amal Ghusain	- Portfolio Holder for Communities and Culture
Councillor Ruth Williams	- Portfolio Holder for Supporting People
Councillor Laura Wright	- Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development and Services

7 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 11 February 2021 were taken as read, approved as correct, for signing by the Chair at the earliest possible convenience.

8 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

9 Questions from the public under Standing Order 19

No questions from members of the public were received.

10 Questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order 20

In accordance with Standing Order No 20 the following questions, which had been circulated in advance to Members of the Committee, had been submitted by Councillor D. Moore, Councillor Wardle and Councillor M. Mitchell respectively.

Questions from Non Committee Members

Councillor D. Moore - Please can the Portfolio Holder provide an update on the development of a community asset transfer policy and the process that will be followed to do so.

Councillor Ghusain, the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Culture, gave the following response:-

A draft Community Asset Transfer policy was due to go out to consultation earlier this year. This has been postponed as we did not want to go out to consultation at the same time that the Green Spaces consultation was open as there may be some duplication. We will be taking the feedback from the green spaces consultation with plans to go out to consultation on the Community Asset Transfer in June/July. Reports will go to Executive in October.

Supplementary question and answer.

What will be the process of the consultation and will there be in depth work with community organisations and interested community groups or just an on line consultation?

The policy and questions are being drafted for inclusion via an on line consultation. In depth discussions will be of great value and it is proposed to consult the voluntary and community sector in this way through Exeter Connect.

Councillor D. Moore The High Court recently ruled that during the coronavirus crisis councils can legally provide accommodation to people sleeping rough who aren't usually eligible for accommodation because of their immigration status. Will the Portfolio Holder oversee an urgent review of past applications and current provision, working with other local agencies as required to ensure no-one have fallen through the net?

Councillor Williams, the Portfolio Holder for Supporting People, gave the following response:-

Housing Needs is not aware of a recent High Court ruling involving a specific or general case. If Councillor D. Moore could provide a reference/case info we will of course look into it.

The most recent advice including an amendment to normal homelessness legislative practice relating to homeless people with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) came in the form of the attached Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) letter dated 24 June 2020. This notified all local housing authorities of the temporary suspension of derogation relating to European Economic Area (EEA) nationals seeking emergency housing in the UK. It basically stated that EEA NRPF nationals could be temporarily provided with accommodation for a period of up to 12 weeks maximum in any period between 24 June 2020 and 31 December 2020. After that date proposed new immigration rules would be implemented. To my knowledge these have not yet materialised.

As it was, this perceived relaxation in the application of eligibility for the NRPF cohort was actually restricted in practice. It prohibited the use of statutory funding or access to welfare benefits. So it actually only meant that the NRPF cohort were permitted access to temporary housing via private or voluntary sector routes only. The issue for the former was that rent could not be paid through housing benefit and statutory funding such as Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) grant money for example could not be used to cover the cost deficit. Therefore, it did not permit a viable access route into temporary housing for the NRPF cohort.

Regardless of the above, the Housing Needs and local homelessness partners practice during lockdown periods has been to enable offers of temporary accommodation through local commercial providers to individuals with NRPF who have wanted emergency accommodation. This has been under the principle of aligning with law under lockdown and government guidance for risk and harm minimisation (sanctioned practice under Public Health England and MHCLG). The numbers in this cohort in the city are small and not all offers of accommodation have been accepted by the individuals. However subject to further ruling around immigration status this practice is anticipated to continue for the foreseeable short term. At this moment records from outreach and other local homelessness services are not identifying any verified rough sleepers with NRPF status who have not had an offer of temporary accommodation. Our records this week record three persons with NRPF status, two of whom have declined to engage to date and one who has been evicted from two local accommodations both as a result of serious anti-social behaviour.

Anyone suspected to be NRPF and not yet been in contact with the Council or other partner services should be encouraged to contact Housing Advice team on 01392 265726 housing.advice@exeter.gov.uk

Or if rough sleeping : via Outreach on 01392 284287

exeter-outreach@julianhouse.org.uk

Or via Streetlink www.streetlink.org.uk 0300 500 0914

Councillor D. Moore advised that the High Court reference number was:-

Ncube R (on the application of) v Brighton and Hove City Council [2021] EWHC 578 (Admin) Mr Justice Freedman

Questions from Committee Members

Councillor Wardle - Regarding the newly formed Exeter Harbour Board can the Portfolio Holder give details of future plans relating to encouraging use of the Exeter Ship Canal, River Exe and estuary for both boaters and wider leisure purposes?

In this regard it is very gratifying to note the recent cutting back of both trees along the Canal towpaths and weed in the Canal and the contribution this work makes to greater safe use of the canal.

Is it the intention to publish dates of meetings and minutes of the Harbour Board or what are the arrangements for transparency of decision making?

Councillor Harvey, the Portfolio Holder for City Management, praised the work of those Council staff who had continued their work in respect of the Canal and Waterways during the Pandemic and gave the following response:-

We continue to work with representative groups through the Exe Estuary Management Partnership, Port User Group and Canal User Group in our efforts to maintain the waterways as a safe and sustainable public asset. We encourage people to enjoy the water but need to be mindful of striking a balance across those many and diverse groups (e.g. anglers, kayaks, kite surfers, paddle-boarders, yachts and bird watchers) so as to avoid any one recreational activity becoming detrimental

to others. It is true to say that the Ship Canal could attract more visiting vessels which would in turn would offer financial benefits to both the Council and local trade around the basin and quayside areas. We are looking at improving both our facilities and marketing in order to attract additional boats.

The Harbour Board will be part of the Council's overall democratic function with agendas and minutes being published on our website similar to other Committees. The Harbour Board will report directly to the Council's Executive who will need to agree any recommendations that might require significant new expenditure.

Supplementary question and answer.

Is it the intention to restrict navigation on the Exeter Ship Canal, a valuable asset, dating back many centuries and which other Council's would be proud to have within their ownership?

Because of the significant costs involved and pressures on resources there are no proposals to restrict navigation. The Council however is committed to fulfilling its duty to keep the Canal and waterways safe and, following a comprehensive survey of associated assets, is undertaking a programme of repairs and renewals. Similarly, work had already been undertaken to strengthen Topsham Lock to ensure that the Canal is watertight, although there are no funds to return it to an operational lock.

Councillor M. Mitchell - What additional resources are the Council deploying to counter the massive increase in graffiti across the city following the cut back in the service during the last six months?

Councillor Harvey, the Portfolio Holder for City Management, gave the following response:-

The Graffiti Service re-started on Monday 15 March 2021 with the help of some additional government funding related to the reopening of our highstreets. With that extra funding we are currently running a five day a week service in our City and district centres. From today, 1 April 2021 we will be using more of the same fund, to add to our budget for this financial year and increase the service to seven days a week. We will keep that running for a few weeks to help clear the backlog.

Supplementary questions and answers.

When will the backlog be cleared and, in addition to online reporting by the public, do Council officers also report incidents?

Can the community be involved through the provision, on request, of cleaning materials?

Clearance is dependent on the size and scale of the graffiti as well as the ongoing nature of these incidents. The service has been extended to seven days a week to clear the backlog and, previously, a full active team has kept on top of the problem. Whilst utility cabinets can be easily cleaned, cleaning porous materials such as brickwork can prove time consuming. Staff, including the Parks and Green Spaces Team, regularly flag up areas of graffiti.

Staff are required to wear full protective clothing because of the dangerous nature of the cleaning materials. These chemicals are the associated equipment and are not really suitable for use by community groups. Some lower strength graffiti wipes are

available to use but these can only be used successfully on certain types and so their value is limited.

The Portfolio Holder referred to the valuable involvement of the public in clearing litter from parks etc., materials being made available via Belle Isle Nursery.

The Chair reminded Members that graffiti was one of the issues being considered by the Scrutiny Programme Board for a potential Task and Finish Group and asked for a steer on what particular aspect of the problem should be investigated.

Cllr M. Mitchell - Can the Portfolio Holder report on the current number of applicants on the council housing waiting list and indicate how this number has changed during the last 12 months?

Councillor Williams, the Portfolio Holder for Supporting People, gave the following response:-

Answer

The total number of households on the waiting list for Exeter is 2,772 as at 1 March 2021. This is 296 higher than the figure of 2,476 as at 3 March 2020. Respective breakdown of waiting lists is provided below. Just over 200 of the additional demand is for 1-bed properties.

Active as at 01.03.2021

	1 Bed	2 Bed	3 Bed	4 Bed	5 Bed	6 Bed	7 Bed	Total
Band A	3	5	1	1				10
Band B	294	157	48	30	19	6	2	556
Band C	175	230	256	85	4	2		752
Band D	1222	151	40	13	5	1		1432
Band E	11	6	1	4				22
Total	1705	549	346	133	28	9	2	2772

Active as at 01.03.2020

	A	B	C	D	E	Total
1 Bed	2	238	164	1087	7	1498
2 Bed	1	130	198	153	2	484
3 Bed	1	66	225	50		342
4 Bed		30	79	14		123
5 Bed		16	5	2		23
6 Bed		2	2			4
7 Bed		2				2
Total	4	484	673	1306	9	2476

For added information purposes there were 401 lets to households on the waiting list in Exeter in the same 12 month period. The following table sets out the details of those lets.

No. of bedrooms	Gen needs	Sheltered	Grand Total
1	122	37	159
2	163	3	166
3	64		64
4	12		12
Grand Total	361	40	401

Supplementary questions and answers.

Are there sufficient resources in the system to cope with a possible surge in demand for accommodation through failure to pay private and public sector rentals with associated evictions as a result of the Pandemic?

Are young people mixed with the over 55's in accommodation identified for the latter cohort?

What is the waiting time to move into the various bands of accommodation?

Government funding helped provide additional capacity primarily for rough sleepers and the Council has supplemented this by targeting the use of Section 106 monies to provide additional affordable housing, through its social housing building programme in the medium term and its work with partners to help those who approach the Council for assistance.

There is no policy to mix young people in over 55 designated housing.

Different sources are used to provide accommodation such as the private sector, especially for priority cases, but timescales vary depending on need and the type of accommodation available. Available data will be circulated to Members.

11 **Presentation on Wellbeing Exeter**

The Chair welcomed James Bogue, the Active and Healthy People Programme Lead to the meeting. In a detailed and informative presentation he set out the background to the creation of Wellbeing Exeter Partnership, the initial and expanded funding and involvement of a wide range of partners including national bodies and use of national best practice, the governance structure of the Partnership, the contributions made by key participants, notably 13 delivery partners, 17 GP practices, 26 Community Connectors, 12 Community Builders and 4 Community Physical Activity Organisers, the response to the Covid-19 Pandemic and the current position.

The full presentation has been circulated separately to all Members.

The following details were provided on the current position and to inform Members of a forthcoming review of Wellbeing Exeter:-

- the Exeter Community Wellbeing hotline and partnership remain open as part of business as usual;
- shielding formally ended on 31 March 2021 with planning underway to step up in the event of local outbreaks. Currently systems and data sharing agreements run until March 2022;

- Westbank Community Health and Care had withdrawn from the Partnership and their involvement ended on 31 March 2021;
- due to uncertainty regarding funding from the Devon County Council/Clinical Commissioning Group after March 2021, Age UK Exeter and Estuary League of Friends would no longer be part of the Partnership;
- the programme was being reviewed and redesigned with funders, stakeholders and delivery partners to ensure that within available resource, it could continue supporting individuals and communities to improve their health and wellbeing in the post-Covid landscape, focusing on those who have been most impacted by the pandemic;
- an interim March – June operational plan was in place to manage the exit of the three providers and ensure the continued delivery of the programme. The revised model would be rolled out from July onwards; and
- for the future a strong collaborative partnership was proposed involving nine delivery partners with a range of specialisms and reach across the city continues, including working with young people and families, community building and supporting individuals and communities to be more physically active.

The following questions on Wellbeing Exeter had been received prior to the meeting and these, together with the responses of the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Culture – Councillor Ghusain, are set out below.

Questions from Non Committee Members

Councillor D. Moore Please can the Portfolio Holder explain why the funding for Community Connectors was cut at short notice, and what relationship with GP's as part of the Exeter Wellbeing model is expected in future?

Councillor D. Moore thanked the Active and Healthy People Programme Lead for his presentation.

Answer

Delivery Contracts were terminated with three months' notice for Community Connectors as a result of uncertainty around future long term funding, the withdrawal of a key delivery partner (Westbank) and the impact of COVID. These factors led towards a decision made by the Wellbeing Exeter Steering Group to review the programme and develop a three year strategy with funding secured from key partners.

The relationship with GP's and the overarching four Primary Care Networks will continue with GP's being able to refer any patient requiring support to Community Connectors. There is a current contract with Primary Care Networks to deliver children, young people and family focussed referrals through the national Link Worker programme until 2022/23.

Supplementary question and answer.

Will the voluntary sector as well as participants and beneficiaries be involved in the review to help determine the future development of the programme?

The review is to be managed by the Devon Community Foundation on behalf of the partners, the two main strands of consultation being via Exeter Connect involving the voluntary and community sectors and with the Community Builders to obtain their valuable insights achieved during the months of the Pandemic.

It is the intention to fully engage with both community organisations and individuals through a broad range of conversations in the coming weeks to obtain views and insights to feed into the review. It is possible that, from the evidence gained, resources may be positioned in different areas.

Questions from Committee Members

Councillor M. Mitchell – What is the governance structure of Wellbeing Exeter? As a partnership body what are its lines of accountability? As a semi -public body are the meetings of any Executive body open to the public and are the minutes of the organisation publicly available?

Answer

Wellbeing Exeter is governed by a steering group consisting of senior officers from strategic funding partners, chaired by the Director at the City Council Terms of Reference can be circulated). The accountability lies with senior officers from the key funding partners represented on the steering group. The steering group is not currently open to the public and meeting minutes are shared to steering group members. A governance review is being conducted as part of the wider programme review to be delivered from 1 July 2021.

Supplementary question and answer.

Given the £1.3 million investment in the programme, can assurances be given that the programme going forward will be open and transparent?

Answer

A vital element of the review process will be determining the methodology for Member engagement in the Wellbeing Exeter programme and both the City Council and County Council Portfolio Holders will be fully involved in bringing forward the revised governance structure. One suggestion is for two Member briefing sessions annually.

Which body or bodies are responsible for the financial auditing of Wellbeing Exeter?

Answer

Exeter City Council is the accountable body for funding which is pooled from strategic partners. Devon Community Foundation and programme managers of Wellbeing Exeter, manage and report on the programme budget; a financial report including all income and expenditure is submitted quarterly and reviewed by the steering group. The financial auditing is undertaken by the Exeter City Council auditing team.

How is Wellbeing Exeter audited in regard to its operational targets and are those set by its funders?

Answer

Wellbeing Exeter is performance managed by steering group members (strategic funding partners) who receive a monthly dashboard of activities and quarterly reports.

An annual report is prepared by Devon Community Foundation and submitted to steering group members.

Supplementary questions and answers.

What is the review timescale, are the reports publicly available and can an annual report be made to the City Council?

Answers

It is the intention to complete the review by July.

The reporting mechanisms include monthly dashboard data, quarterly reports to the steering group and an annual report produced by the Devon Community Foundation. Both elements of the dashboard data and an annual report have been included on the Wellbeing Exeter website where a wealth of information is available.

Transparency will be important and an annual report will be made to the City Council.

Is auditing by the City Council appropriate?

Answer

The City Council is only one of a number of partners, all of whom, through the Steering Group, maintain robust oversight of the programme. The accounts of the Devon Community Foundation, who manage the programme, are audited and the Foundation provides quarterly reports seen by the City Council as one of the partners. The City Council itself audits the programme's accounts and the Council's audit function is a long standing and respected function.

During the pandemic a vast number of individuals and groups came forward to assist those in need. Many were grant assisted. To what extent has this network being formalised or integrated into the work of Wellbeing Exeter?

Answer

We were very fortunate that so many local community response groups stepped forward to support people within their communities over the past 12 months. Regular contact was kept with the groups through our Exeter Community Wellbeing partner Exeter Connect. Many of these groups have now folded as the requests for support have lessened. We have sent a recent communication to the groups to ask if they intend to continue in any form. Exeter Connect will continue to keep contact with residents and groups who wish to continue to play an active role and offer development and capacity building as requested.

Supplementary question and answer.

What was the extent of the geographical coverage of the voluntary support?

There was excellent city-wide coverage, particularly by a wide range of bodies already operating across Exeter such as the Exeter Foodbank and the Exeter City Community Trust etc.

Every area benefitted from grass roots support to differing degrees. This support ranged from existing local community support groups and community associations

with more informal groups springing up such as neighbourhood, street and WhatsApp groups. It was clear that all groups providing greatly valued help and it was the intention to examine the potential of harnessing this voluntary support and incorporating it into future programmes.

The Portfolio Holder for Supporting People commended the work of the Community Builders and Community Connectors and other informal groups such as a group in Pennsylvania distributing medicines city wide. As a volunteer at the Beacon Centre she had also participated in the pairing up process of individuals with local volunteers and support groups.

The Chair thanked the Active and Healthy People Programme Lead for his presentation and the contribution of Members to the debate. He also asked that his thanks and those of the Committee be conveyed to the Community Connectors and Community Builders and all other community groups who had done so much during the Pandemic.

The Chair invited suggestions from Members on how the outcomes of the review should be progressed, welcoming a specific role for this Scrutiny Committee.

The Programme Lead stated that twice yearly briefings to all Members would be particularly valuable which was supported and the Chair invited Members to feed into the review process, in advance if possible, with comments and ideas to be sent on line to both himself and the Programme Lead.

Members welcomed this approach and noted that the results of the review would be reported to this Scrutiny Committee.

12 **Spotlight Review - Consultation Charter**

The Chair reported that the Spotlight Review had met on 16 March 2021, the group comprising Councillors Atkinson, Buswell, Leadbetter, D. Moore and Wardle with Councillor Atkinson appointed Chair. Councillor Atkinson had referred Members to the Guide to Community Engagement report - New Conversations - produced by the LGA.

The Review Group had considered the LGA document in detail and agreed that it would be appropriate to amend the draft Charter to incorporate elements from the LGA document. As the Spotlight Review group had asked to "sign off" a revised draft, it was being amended for further consideration by the group together with a draft framework for consultation plans for report to the next meeting of this Scrutiny Committee and then to Executive and Council.

The Chair invited Members to advise on line should they have any comments on consultation processes.

The Chair thanked Members for their contribution to the Committee during what had been a very interesting and challenging 12 months.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.18 pm

Chair

DRAFT