

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

16 January 2007

Present:

Councillor Rachel Lyons (Chair)

Councillors Winterbottom, Branston, Choules, Cole, Mrs Danks, Mrs Evans, Hannford, Hobden, Mills, Mitchell, Robson and R Smith

Director of Community and Environment, Head of Leisure and Museums, Head of Housing and Social Inclusion, Principal Environmental Health Officer (RP) and Member Services Officer (HB)

Also present:

Councillor Dilys Baldwin - Portfolio Holder for Housing & Social Inclusion
Councillor Peter Edwards - Portfolio Holder for Environment & Leisure
Nicki Glassbrook - Manager, Street Outlook Homeless Team

1. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2006 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

2. **Declarations of Interests**

Members declared the following personal interests as indicated: -

COUNCILLOR	MINUTE
Councillor Lyons	3 and 10 (tenant of an allotment)
Councillor Hannaford	7 (lived in an area referred to in the report)

3. **Estimates and Fees and Charges 2007/08**

Councillor Lyons declared a personal interest in the fees and charges as a tenant of an allotment.

The Director Community and Environment presented a report on the Community and Housing Revenue Account Estimates and Fees and Charges, which outlined the strategic framework within which the estimates had been prepared, changes in accounting practices which affected all budgets and gave detailed reasons for major changes in the Management Unit estimates. Detailed schedules of the capital programme for Community and Housing were also attached to the report.

The following responses were made to queries raised by Members:-

- in future, new litter bins would include a facility for the disposal of cigarettes;

- a reduced budget for land adoption reflected the reduction in the area of such land;
- a report on progress with tree management would be submitted to the next meeting of this Committee;
- the four environmental protection assistants were part of the Dog Warden service;
- the popularity of the Leisure Card had been in decline partly as a result of the introduction of alternative membership schemes by DC Leisure Management and its future operation was to be reviewed shortly. Execard, one of its spin-offs, utilised by benefit claimants, was operating well; and
- Home Aid was now run through the Supporting People Programme on a Devon Wide Basis and was suffering some teething problems.

The Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the draft Revenue Estimates for 2007/08 and Fees and Charges for approval by the Executive.

(Report and Community and Housing Estimates and Fees and Charges circulated)

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE EXECUTIVE

4. Housing Rents 2007/08

The Head of Housing Services presented a report recommending a rent increase from 1 April 2007 for council dwellings.

Members were advised that the cost of rental for RSL properties was some £10-£15 greater than for Council properties but that rentals for similar size properties were likely to converge in the next 4/5 years.

The Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report and recommended Executive approve that rents of Council dwellings are increased from 1 April 2007, by an average of 5%, which includes a general increase of 3.6% together with the phased introduction of the Government's rent restructuring proposals.

(Report circulated)

5. Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2006-2036

The Head of Housing Services presented a report advising Members of the annual review of the Housing Revenue Account Business Plan.

In response to a Member, he advised that despite an overall positive picture in terms of finance, performance and service improvements, the Business Plan predicted an increasing funding gap between available resources and capital programme commitments from 2012 onwards. Whilst there were many variables in the financial model that could not be accurately predicted, such as changes in Government policy, the plan would need careful monitoring over the next 4-5 years to ensure resources were not over-committed. A range of actions that could be taken, such as seeking efficiencies in goods and services, were set out in the report.

The Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the report and asked Executive to approve the 2006-2036 HRA Business Plan.

(Report circulated)

6. **Operation of Scrutiny within the Council**

The Chair reported on the conclusions of the working party set up by this Committee to review scrutiny arrangements. The conclusions of the working group had included:-

- update reports, for example, on the RAMM project and the Riverside Valley Park and certain performance management reports such as those on Ethnic Monitoring and Homelessness to be circulated to all Members via Extract;
- all Performance Management reports be reported to Committee annually only, but at different times of the year, unless in-year changes were significant. Where unusual patterns emerged reports would be brought forward to the next available Committee, subject to prior consultation with the Chair, Deputy Chair and Portfolio Holder;
- officers be requested to circulate relevant ward information to all Members as and when necessary, making use of electronic means as much as possible;
- the establishment of more working groups to scrutinise individual issues be supported; and
- as far as possible, reports be evenly spread throughout the year, with lengths reduced if feasible.

She invited Members' comments on the Scrutiny process. Members made the following points:-

- process requires sharpening up by, for example, providing a forward plan of topics to be included on agenda, an enhanced role for portfolio holders by including them at the table in order to participate in debates and/or respond to issues raised by Committee Members rather than the current system of question and answers and the creation of more working groups for in depth consideration of individual issues. The Chair suggested that some portfolio holders were frustrated that they could not participate around the table. One Member suggested that the portfolio holders should be available to report at every meeting rather than twice a year as suggested in the report. Another Member felt that twice a year was sufficient. One Member explained that portfolio holders were not currently included in the round table discussions as it had been felt that their presence would mitigate against the efficient undertaking of the business on the agenda;
- opposition Members should be offered Chairs of all Scrutiny Committees;
- many backbench members feel that they have little ownership of the scrutiny process and that although issues are debated there is seldom any significant change to policies and little impact on Executive deliberations;
- welcome updates on for example RAMM and Riverside Valley Park by other means than the Committee agenda;
- there should be an even spread of reports throughout the year to avoid excessive number of reports going to any one meeting;

- improved reporting of performance indicators for example comparison of progress with year end targets which hopefully would be addressed by the new performance management system. Performance management reports should be placed at the beginning of the agenda. Some Members opposed this suggestion. With regard to the reporting of statistics, the Director Community and Environment advised that, generally, targets were met and that the few exceptions were always highlighted. Crucial targets such as housing rents and re-cycling were monitored as often as every two weeks;
- review timing of Committee meetings within Committee cycle with consideration to be given to timetabling extra meetings. It was noted that the timetable was influenced by the need to keep the election period clear, the unavoidable gap after the Annual Meeting and the August recess;
- establish more working parties for in depth consideration of issues;
- retain certain reports on the agenda with Members asked to raise issues with officers separately outside the meeting thus mirroring the practice of the Planning Committee where Members are requested to advise the Development Control Manager or Head of Planning Services of any questions on the schedule of planning applications determined under delegated powers and applications that have been withdrawn prior to the meeting of the Planning Committee.

The Chair advised that the above views would be reported to the next Executive with the views of the other Scrutiny Committees on the scrutiny process and that there would be a further meeting between the three Scrutiny Chairs and the Assistant Chief Executive. She supported a Member's suggestion that research be carried out into the operation of scrutiny at other Councils including those similar to Exeter to inform the review. Members specifically supported the proposal that progress reports on RAMM and the Riverside Valley Park be included in future editions of Extract.

Scrutiny Committee - Community requested that the above views be reported to Executive.

(Report circulated)

7. **Local Air Quality Management Air Quality Management Area**

Councillor Hannaford declared a personal interest as he lived in an area referred to in the report.

The Principal Environmental Health Officer updated Members on the outcome of the consultation exercise on the proposed Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) for Exeter. He advised that the Environment Agency had commented favourably on the report but that the views of the business community were still awaited. He stated that the City Council had a duty to monitor air quality and that the outcome of this process helped inform the Local Transport Plan produced by the County Council - approval by the Government was subject to a satisfactory Air Quality Management Plan. Comments made following the consultation process were being taken up by the County Council such as changing the location of a bus stop to limit the impact of emissions from stationary buses.

Members felt that the development of walking buses for schools should be encouraged although it was noted that parents had not been supportive of such an

initiative at Pinhoe School. A Member also remarked that the disbanding of school catchment areas would exacerbate the problems of bus journeys and their impact on the environment. School coaches were cited as a significant contributor to increasing pollution particularly where inner city schools were serviced by 4-5 coaches. One Member felt that in some cases the public were reluctant to respond to the consultation as only radical solutions were likely to address the growing problems of air pollution from increasing traffic.

The Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the results of the consultation exercise, supported the report and recommended Executive to:-

- 1) agree the proposed AQMA, as displayed at the meeting;
- 2) approve the order designating the chosen boundaries, using the form of words detailed in Appendix III of the report; and
- 3) approve the sealing and copying for submission to DEFRA.

(Report circulated)

8. **Audible Intruder Alarms- Alarm Notification Areas**

The Principal Environmental Health Officer presented the report on the outcome of the consultation process for the proposed designation of the whole of Exeter as an alarm notification area and seeking approval for both the designation of the whole of Exeter as an alarm notification area and the amount of the Fixed Penalty Notice.

The following responses were made to queries raised by Members:-

- as the Police tended not to respond to calls in respect of alarms it was often left to the Community Patrollers to make immediate responses where possible if within their working hours. A further report would be made to this Committee on the out of hour service provided;
- the Local Government Bill was likely to contain provision for the making of byelaws on specific issues but the Clean Neighbourhood and Environment Act 2005 which provided for the designation of alarm notification areas was new legislation which had been introduced following consultation with local authorities to deal with this type of problem; and
- legal action could be taken against registered individuals and the decision whether to take formal action would be considered on a case by case basis.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the report and recommended Executive approve the following:-

- 1) the designation of Exeter as an alarm notification area; and
- 2) the setting of the Fixed Penalty Notice fine at £75.

(Report circulated)

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

9. Review of the Corporate Environmental Strategy

The Principal Environmental Health Officer presented a report setting out the outcome of the review of the Council's Corporate Environmental Strategy. The report also highlighted the fundamental changes that had been made to the Strategy including combining the Corporate Environmental Strategy and the Environmental Strategy for Exeter into a single document, the setting of new targets for resource use and the amendment of a number of policy statements. The report also set out a way forward regarding the Council's approach to tackling climate change.

The Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the report and:-

- (1) requested Executive to approve the draft Environmental Strategy;
- (2) requested that following consultation on the approved draft strategy in February the final strategy be submitted to Executive in March 2007 for adoption;
- (3) requested that general progress on meeting the aims of the Strategy be monitored on an annual basis and reported to this Scrutiny Committee;
- (4) made a commitment to undertake a full review of the Strategy in five years time; and
- (5) noted the proposal to produce a Strategic Climate Change Action Plan.

(Report circulated)

10. Allotment Strategy 2007-2011

Councillor Lyons declared a personal interest as a tenant of an allotment.

Councillor DJ Morrish attended the meeting and spoke on this item having given notice under Standing Order No. 44.

The Head of Contracts and Direct Services presented the report setting out a revised five-year allotment strategy for 2007-2011 including the action plan.

The Member speaking under Standing Orders welcomed the report and felt that the total number of 1,200 plots in the City together with the waiting list of over 200 was encouraging as both indicated an enthusiasm for this healthy and sustainable pursuit. With reference to the circulated map of allotments in Exeter he suggested however that the geographic spread across the City was uneven. Although there was a good representation to the west of the River there was a marked lack of such facilities to the north and east of the City, particularly the latter area. A sparsity in the east could be explained in part by the Sowton Industrial Estate and the generous garden areas provided in the Burnthouse Lane estate when constructed in the 1930's. However,

modern estate designs often provided for small garden areas and this was apparent with the new houses in the Clyst Heath area.

Although the new Clyst Heath Primary School was helping develop a community ethos there still remained a need to build on social and neighbourhood activity and he suggested that an allotment site would be very valuable in this regard. He suggested that greater use should be made of Section 106 Agreements in order to seek contributions from developers towards allotment provision. He asked that a further report be submitted to a future meeting of this Committee on identifying and bringing forward new allotment sites in the City particularly in areas of new housing estates.

Members supported this suggestion and also asked that further work be undertaken to ensure adequate water supply to allotments. One Member suggested that allotments fees, which were relatively cheap, could be increased to meet the costs of improved services for allotments, particularly water butts etc.

The Scrutiny Committee - Community:-

- 1) supported the allotment strategy including the Action Plan as set out in the report;
- 2) requested that the Council seek to encourage the use of Section 106 Agreements to promote new allotments; and
- 3) requested the retention of Marypole Allotments.

(Report circulated)

11. **Leisure and Museums Unit Strategy 2007-2012**

The Head of Leisure and Museums presented the report reviewing the previous Leisure Strategy and recommending a draft replacement for wider consultation, before formal adoption by the Council in the spring.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report and the new draft Strategy.

(Report circulated)

PERFORMANCE MONITORING

12. **Homelessness Strategy - Rough Sleeping**

The Chair welcomed Nikki Glassbrook of the Street Homeless Outreach Team who responded as follows to the issues raised by Members:-

- in addition to the bi-annual street counts undertaken on behalf of the City Council using a methodology devised by central government, the team undertook early morning outreach on three mornings each week, one later morning outreach sessions twice a week and hotspot counts. Car parks were included in the counts but the team did not enter those buildings judged to be occupied by squatters

because of the potential danger. Although Government requirements specified the time of the year for the counts to take place other counts were taken to provide better information on rough sleeping patterns. The team provided quarterly reports to the City Council;

- the team also worked with discharged prisoners with no accommodation;
- the target of no more than 9 rough sleepers set by the Government dated from 1997/98 and the criteria used - bedded down for the night between the hours of 12 midnight and 3am - had not changed. As such, beggars, Big Issue sellers and individuals moving between hostels, friends and squats would not necessarily be covered;
- a number of rough sleepers passed through the City, sometimes on a regularly occurring basis;
- an assertive approach was adopted to help reach out to all rough sleepers;
- fares were provided to assist return to area of origin but only where confirmation was provided of guaranteed accommodation. Contact was also made with SHOTs in other areas;
- some rough sleepers had complex needs and mental health issues and some, because of these problems, had been banned for certain periods from Gabriel House/Esther Community etc.;
- there was no evidence to date of migrant workers sleeping rough as was being experienced in London with the Polish Community;
- severe action has been taken where owners of houses in multiple occupation, sometime in collusion with “gang masters”, had provided unacceptable conditions for migrant workers;
- whereas in previous years there had been a difficulty in identifying suitable premises for hostels, there were now problems in obtaining sufficient funding for staffing and management through the Supporting People Programme; and
- a “dry accommodation” facility existed in the City.

The Head of Housing Services presented the report informing Members of the work undertaken by the Street Homeless Outreach Team (SHOT) to provide help, advice and assistance to rough sleepers in the City. He undertook to ensure Members received regular updates on homelessness and rough sleeper figures.

He enlarged on that part of the report relating to general homelessness statistics, reporting that good practice advocated by the Department for Communities and Local Government had been taken on board. He responded as follows to queries raised by Members:-

- the high number of 4,500 on the overall waiting list recently reported in the press related, in part, to the increase in the lack of affordable accommodation within the City both for sale and for rent. Many landlords were seeking to capitalize their assets and there had also been an increase in the number of parents/friends/relatives who were unwilling to accommodate children and/or relatives. There had also been an increase in private sector rents. Although graphs set out in the report showed that there had been a large increase in approaches to the service since 2002/03, the number of homeless applications taken and the number of people formally accepted had decreased over the same period;

- 232 affordable housing units had been provided in 2005/06 with a similar figure likely to be provided for 2006/07 - in excess, therefore, of the annual target of 180. However many developers were seeking to change new schemes to provide accommodation for students and this could impact on figures in future years;
- the ending of shorthold tenancies and the reluctance of friends and families to accommodate individuals were the top two reasons for homelessness. The Council undertook considerable work in mediating with families and landlords;
- less use was made of bed and breakfast accommodation largely as a result of increased opportunities through private sector leasing; and
- significant efforts were also made to encourage single elderly to downsize from three and four bed properties. A grant had been made to McCarthy and Stone to facilitate the provision of 15 nominations for their new development in Heavitree.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

13. **Progress Report on the Home Energy Conservation Strategy**

The Director Community and Environment informed Members of progress being made by the City Council in respect of Exeter's Home Energy Conservation Act (HECA) Strategy.

The Chair referred to the importance of publishing the availability of grants.
Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the progress made towards implementing Exeter's Home Energy Conservation Strategy.

(Report circulated)

14. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next Scrutiny Committee - Community will be held on Tuesday 27 February 2007 at 5.30 p.m.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.30 pm

Chair