

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - ECONOMY

7 November 2007

Present:

Councillor Adrian Fullam (Chair)

Councillors Martin, Choules, Coates, Mrs Evans, Gale, Hannaford, Pettinger, Prowse, Wadham and Winterbottom

Director Economy and Tourism, Head of Economy and Tourism, Head of Estates Services and Member Services Officer (SLS)

Also present:

Councillor Greg Sheldon - Portfolio Holder for Economy and Tourism
Councillor John Shepherd - Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Development and Transport

42. **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 September 2007 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

43. **Declarations of Interest**

The following personal interests were declared:-

COUNCILLOR	MINUTE
Councillor Gales	46(wife an employee of Exeter University (Northcott Theatre)
Councillor Choules	46 (an employee of Exeter University)
Councillor Wadham	46 (Member of the Arts Council)

OFFICER	MINUTE
John Rigby, Director	43 (Member of the Board of Sustrans)

44. **PORTFOLIO HOLDERS TO PRESENT THEIR HALF YEARLY REPORT**

Councillor P J Shepherd (Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Development and Transport) and Councillor G N Sheldon (Portfolio Holder for Economy and Tourism) presented a verbal report on the priorities for the Committee's work programme for the remainder of the year.

Councillor Shepherd highlighted the key areas for the Planning and Sustainable Development Portfolio:-

- **Climate Change** – After a period of consultation the City Council will review the responses to the draft Climate Change Strategy for Exeter. This strategy sets out key proposals for how the Council and others can take the lead in reducing carbon emissions. The Final Strategy will be presented to Executive in January.
- **Policy** – Further work on the core strategy of the Local Development Framework is being undertaken. Supplementary Planning Documents on Affordable Housing and Student Accommodation have been prepared, but Members have yet to see the draft core strategy.
- **Future Projects** – Princesshay has successfully opened; options for a suitable conversion scheme for Debenhams to retail, leisure and residential are being discussed; and the Council’s major projects team are preparing background studies for the future redevelopment of the Bus Station site.
- **City Centre Enhancements** – the improvement works in Lower High Street, Cathedral Yard and Cathedral Close have been completed.
- **The New Growth Point** - we continue to work with the New Growth Point Board to progress the joint project for the East of Exeter area.
- **Transportation** –
 - Buses** - we continue to support a further bid by the County Council for TIF funding tying in with the Park and Ride Strategy. Lottery funding has been attracted to implement a Travel Smart Scheme which will provide door to door advice on public transport services targeting up to 30,000 households in the city. There has also been considerable work carried out by the Directorate Projects Officer relating to the future funding options for the Concessionary Fares Scheme.
 - Rail** – we continue lobbying First Great Western on a number of issues relating to their Franchise; an outline scheme for improvements to the forecourt of Central Station has been submitted to Network Rail.
- **Walking and Cycling** – there are a number of welcome initiatives with other partners including the extension of the Exeter cycle network to 18 km; 29 out of the 37 Exeter Schools have Travel Plans and over 890 children have received cycle training. Progress has also been made on plans for the walking loop in Exwick, a route in Topsham along Sir Alec Walk and proposals for a path between Summerway and Pinhoe Road are also currently being worked up.
- **Guildhall Car Park** – the refurbishment was completed on time and the new Pay on Foot system is fully operational.
- **District Centres** –local enhancement works in Heavitree, Fore Street will commence in the middle of next year. Design work is being prepared for St Thomas but will not begin on site until the Heavitree project is completed.
- **Natural Environment** – A project officer has been appointed to progress the Wild City project.

The following responses were given to Members:-

- The Director reported that funding of the Travel Smart Scheme included £15,000 from the City Council, £70,000 from the County Council and the remainder was lottery funding of £400,000. This will enable individual interviews allowing tailored information on routes, bus frequencies and passenger fares and will result in a bigger modal shift in travel behaviour than

many other transport initiatives. (*John Rigby declared an interest as a member of the Board of Sustrans*)

- Cllr Shepherd responded to concern over the reduction of some city bus services stating that the City and County Councils have put considerable effort and funding in, ensuring the availability of a good quality public transport system.
- Cllr Shepherd assured a Member that work on Cowick Street would start as soon as the Heavitree scheme was completed. He referred to the Directorate Projects Officer's continued efforts to press for more funding to be committed to St Thomas Railway Station but was not certain if the budget would be sufficient for all the changes necessary to improve accessibility.
- Cllr Shepherd stated that an update on the Green Circle Walk route at Luggs Farm would be provided.
- Cllr Shepherd advised that roadworks at the junction at Sidwell Street and Cheeke Street had been suspended during operation of the Continental Market to improve the environment for traders and pedestrians.
- Cllr Shepherd clarified that the Local Development Framework would not be replacing the Local Plan immediately. It is a new process bringing together various planning documents to provide a general policy on a range of topics including employment, housing and retail provision. The Director added that the LDF process was very time consuming but as part of this that some policies had been prepared such as guidance on student accommodation and houses in multiple occupation which had already been considered by Planning Member Working Group, Planning Committee and Executive.

Councillor Sheldon highlighted the key areas for the Economy and Tourism Portfolio:-

- **Promotion of City Centre Vitality** – Princesshay has successfully opened with over 95% of the units let. The new venues for The Underground Passages; Shopmobility and the Exeter Visitor Information and Ticket Centre have all opened in their new locations. The City Centre Management Partnership Board have approved the City Centre Strategy; and have been working with a number of key city centre partners to enhance the Christmas Launch and a range of activities throughout November and December; work is continuing to develop the Exeter Festival of South West Food and Drink which will take place from 11 - 13 April.
- **Quay/Canal Basin** – the Custom House has been extensively refurbished and the Archaeological Field Unit now occupy the building, which has given more space for the Phoenix Arts Centre at Bradninch Place; Cricklepit Mill has now been occupied by the Devon Wildlife Trust; the refurbishment of the Old Electricity Building is progressing with the legal documentation now complete and work on the Maclaines Warehouse and 60 Haven Road should commence in the New Year.
- **Economic Development** - we continue to provide a proactive service to companies wishing to relocate to Exeter; the Innovation Centre Phase 2 is due to open in January and will provide a hub for hi tech companies; planning for the Science Park is continuing, with the main planning application due to be submitted to East Devon District Council next summer; the Heart of Devon Enterprise Agency has now successfully merged with Enterprise South Devon

and the Council's Economic Development Team continues to work with key agencies to develop skills within the local economy.

- **Tourism** –further work to build on the early success of the Underground Passages, and the new Visitor Information and Tickets Centre is continuing. Joint promotional work of the area with neighbouring associations is producing a promising response for enquiries about accommodation and visiting. It is intended to build up this area of work with the private sector.
- **Arts and Festivals** – we continue to support a range of Festivals either directly delivered by ourselves or supporting others to add to the city's cultural calendar.
- **Property** – we continue to manage our portfolio in an efficient way including the successful relaunch of the Corn Exchange. We will support the refurbishment work of Debenhams.

The following responses were given to Members:-

- The Head of Estates advised that complaints regarding noise during a recent performance arose because the windows were open to counteract a problem with the heating; full sound protection of the windows was not universal in the building but improvements will be made if capital funding can be identified.
- The Head of Economy and Tourism referred to the on line capacity at the Visitor Information and Tickets Centre and would pick up the comments made to extend the on line facility for other ticket purchases.
- The Director responded to comments on the Christmas Lights stating that the infrastructure was developed in conjunction with local businesses. The Princesshay Centre Manager and City Centre Manager coordinated their respective approaches to lighting. He would respond separately to comments made about the Christmas lighting in the District Centres - St Thomas and Heavitree.
- The Director commented on the level of traffic enforcement in the city centre which could not be enforced appropriately until all signage was in place. Despite a high level of monitoring he was unaware of any particular instances of unacceptable cyclist behaviour in Princesshay. He added that a policy on the usage of Bedford Square would be considered by the City Centre Management Partnership Board in January.

The reports of the Portfolio Holders were noted.

45. **APPOINTMENT OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE SUB-GROUP**

Members considered the appointment of a Sub-Group as set out in the operational guidelines for Scrutiny Committees to discuss issues pertinent to the Committee including:-

- To review progress of their Committee in the current year;
- Consider initial proposals for the following year's work programme; and
- Consider general issues relating to the overall workload and operation of the Committee.

The Chair responded to a Member's concern about the purpose of the Sub-Group, he felt this was an effective way of setting the programme.

Scrutiny Committee – Economy supported the appointment of the sub-group which would comprise the Chair and Deputy Chair and Councillors Wadham and Winterbottom. They agreed to identify a date and meet after the Scrutiny training session for Members due to be held on 22 November.

46. **ARTS OVERVIEW**

Councillor Choules declared a personal interest as an employee of Exeter University; Councillor Gale declared an interest as a family member is an employee of Exeter University; and Cllr Wadham declared an interest as a member of the Arts Council.

The Head of Economy and Tourism presented a summary of the arts activities undertaken and detailed the objectives of the current Arts and Media Strategy which provide the focus for the Arts, Festivals and Events Team.

He responded to a number of Member comments -

- That there had been an increasing level of support from the City Council for the Barnfield Theatre which has helped to develop its business activity through providing advice for the development of its Business Plan, with the aim of generating more income. The Head of Estates referred to the City Council's ongoing support and generous interpretation of responsibility for internal repairs particularly those backstage.
- The Director stated that many of the pieces of public art from the old Princesshay have been resited within the scheme, but that the provision of interpretation had yet to be resolved. Some items were not appropriate for returning to the new Princesshay. He would ensure that a list of all the items of public art from the old Princesshay was made available.
- The Head of Economy and Tourism referred to the community based activities agreed with the Northcott Theatre for delivery during its 'dark' period during the refurbishment project. It was intended that this would continue. The new radio station will be based at Phoenix and should start broadcasting from February, offering a distinctive live high quality of live music including local bands and musicians, as well as training and career opportunities.
- The Head of Economy and Tourism agreed that as part of the review of the Art Strategy, they would engage with colleagues at East Devon and Teignbridge District Councils.

A Member also suggested that consideration of a future Arts Strategy should include a lower priority for public art to avoid any criticism from voters. The Director responded stating that public art was often controversial, but the reality was that it can often make a real impact in changing the perception of places.

The Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the report and that a new Arts and Media Strategy would be prepared to provide a focus and framework for future City Council activity to promote and support the Arts.

(Report circulated)

47. **PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT INDICATORS REPORT**

The Director Economy and Development presented the report advising Members on the current position on key performance indicators. He corrected a half year performance figure for major planning applications determined within 13 weeks which should have read 60%, thus hitting the target. He also provided an update on concessionary fares with the take-up increasing from 80% to 85%.

Members passed on their appreciation of the knowledge and professionalism of the Red Coats Guides on a recent Red Coats Guide tour for Members and the commitment of both the Quay House and the Exeter Visitor Information and Tickets Centre staff. A Member asked if anything could be done to make the entrance to the Underground Passages more visible. The Director advised that they were looking at a range of options including improved signage and laser cut paving.

The Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the contents of the report.

(Report circulated)

48. **CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING REPORT (HALF YEARLY)**

The Director Economy and Development presented the report advising Members of the latest position with regard to the 2007/08 Capital Programme for Economy. The report highlighted a number of schemes. The Director confirmed that he would respond to a Member who requested information on the latest position with regard to work at Okehampton Street car park and alleged blocking by a farmer of the Exwick Green Circle Walking route. He also advised that the flowering pear tree in the High Street which had been vandalised was likely to be replaced by the Parks and Open Spaces team shortly.

Members welcomed the continued investment in District Centres such as the Beacon Lane shops and looked forward to other schemes being developed.

The Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the content of this half-yearly report on the capital programme (2007/08) for Economy and Development.

(Report circulated)

49. **ECONOMY STEWARDSHIP TO SEPTEMBER 2007**

The Director presented the report advising Members of any forecast variations to the budget, based on the first six months of the financial year 2007/08. A Member enquired about the rent collected from the Southgate Hotel. The Head of Estates Services responded that the rent income from the Southgate Hotel related to occupation levels, as the City Council owns the freehold of the site.

The Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the contents of this report.

(Report circulated)

50. **PROPERTY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS**

The Head of Estates presented the report informing Members of the position regarding the Council's performance on Property Performance Indicators (PPIs) and to establish further targets for those indicators. The report also proposed new targets for 2007/08.

Members sought clarification on a number of topics including operational and non operational assets, the overall average internal rate of return for the Council's retail portfolio and a specific example of a review of rents in a parade of shops in St Thomas.

The Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the report and adopted the targets for 2007/8.

(Report circulated)

51. **PROPERTY VOIDS AND DEBTS**

The Head of Estates presented the report informing Members of the performance of the City Council's commercial portfolio including void properties for the period 1 February 2007 to 30 September 2007 and debts for the four quarters ending on the September 2007 quarter day. Generally, commercial property in the city centre was in demand, which is reflected by the low level of debts and voids.

Members noted the report and congratulated the Estates Team on their impressive achievement.

(Report circulated)

The meeting commenced at 5.25 pm and closed at 7.55 pm

Chair