

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - ECONOMY

6 March 2014

Present:

Councillor Leadbetter (Chair)

Councillors Brock, Bialyk, Bowkett, Branston, Bull, Crew, Crow, Robson and Wardle

Apologies:

Councillors Martin and Prowse

Also present:

Chief Executive & Growth Director, Assistant Director Economy, Principal Accountant Service (PM), Economy and Tourism Manager, City Centre Manager, Events, Facilities and Markets Manager, Parking and Waterways Manager and Democratic Services Officer (Committees) (SLS)

In attendance:

Councillor Denham – Portfolio Holder for Economy and Culture

Councillor Sutton – Portfolio Holder for City Development

Hilary Stevens – Exeter University

17 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 January 2014 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

18 **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of discloseable pecuniary interests were made.

19 **Cost of Living Forum - Interim Report**

Councillor Branston declared an interest as he was employed by a company which carried out market research.

Councillor Denham, in her capacity as Chair of the Cost of Living Forum presented an interim report on their findings and also sought Members' views and support for funding to conduct and requisition specific research to further this work. Concerns in relation to the cost of living had originally been raised at Scrutiny Committee – Economy, and resulted in the Cost of Living Forum being established, together with two further sub-groups on wages and the affordability of housing. Despite the availability of data and partnership influence, the Forum considered there was a need for more meaningful local data pertaining to Exeter. Researchers from the Marchmount Observatory at Exeter University had offered the opportunity to conduct some individual research including document review, data analysis and consultation. Hilary Stevens, from Exeter University attended the meeting to present more detail of the draft proposal. Members' views were sought on whether the research should be pursued, and how best it could be used for maximum impact.

Hilary Stevens referred to the scoping document and the varying stages of research which included gathering evidence to establish a baseline for wages and cost of

living in Exeter. This would include exploring in partnership with a broad range of stakeholders, a number of strategies and solutions to problems that had been identified following the evidence gathering exercise. The research would also be informed by consideration of the following including -

- providing a clear understanding of what the terms 'cost of living', 'low income' and 'affordability' meant and how these concepts would be measured at the local level.
- looking at the affordability of housing in Exeter and compare to a benchmarked level of analysis.
- consideration of the consequences of low housing affordability for individuals and households, on businesses and the community as a whole using existing research and personal contact for the local view.
- exploring the options for local action by engaging with local stakeholders and local authorities in other areas to consider the main challenges, and
- consideration of the demand for student housing and the effect on private sector renting as well as the costs and benefits of adopting the living wage on household incomes and the wider economy.

Members made the following comments –

- that this funding request for the study should be supported as low pay was an issue in Exeter. Some employers might consider they did not have ability to pay a higher level of wages, but the concerns raised have been gathering momentum and should be addressed.
- that the work of the members of the Forum including Councillor Denham and the Scrutiny Programme Officer should be recognised. The Forum are a significant group who were working hard to raise the profile of a very pertinent issue in the city, and a joint approach relating to issues surrounding housing and wages would be very helpful.
- whether a shared view of a number of issues such as rents could be considered through a benchmarking exercise with similar local authorities.
- there should not be a duplication of the evidence gathering work.
- there was a need for Exeter focused data to inform and programme future study.
- a policy based on sound evidence using a consistent methodology and benchmarking would be important.

Councillor Denham responded to a Member's comment and clarified that the research would be in accordance with the City Council's policy for commissioning external work. She felt that the Exeter specific nature of the work would help inform dealing with issues in the local economy and provide a lever for change. The research was not just about data gathering, but should provide a set of Exeter centric statistics to show what was actually happening on the ground.

Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the report and agreed that the Research Proposal and Costing provided by Exeter University be submitted to the Executive with a request for approval for funding either in whole or part.

20 **Budget Monitoring Report to 31 December 2013 (3rd Quarter)**

The Chair welcomed the new reporting style and acknowledged the combined efforts of the Financial Reporting Task and Finish Group. He invited Members to contact the Scrutiny Programme Officer, Anne-Marie Annal, if they had any more suggestions for further improvements to the report format.

The Principal Accountant Service presented the latest budget monitoring report for the third quarter which advised Members of the material differences by management unit. The current forecast suggested that the net expenditure would increase from the revised budget by a total of £57,390, resulting in a variation of 3.22% from the revised budget. The main deviations from the budget were set out in the report. He updated Members on the improved position of car parking income from last quarter which, it is anticipated would now meet or exceed the budget. He also provided an update on the reduced Economy and Development Capital Programme from £2,591,660 to £2,073,340.

Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the report.

21 **Social Enterprise Support**

Councillor Bowkett declared an interest as an employee of Exeter Council for Voluntary Services.

The Economy and Tourism Manager presented the report, which provided Members with an overview of the support given to social enterprises through Exeter Business Support, other providers and the contribution they make to the local economy. The report detailed support for social enterprises delivered through Exeter Business Support which provided free professional advice and guidance to new start up and fledgling businesses. The original aim of supporting and developing the sector had been achieved, but it was felt some structure should continue for the short term. It was therefore proposed that the contract with Fruit Tree for Business should be extended until the 30 June 2014. This would enable time to consider alternative options to be able to map the existing local, regional and national support and also discuss with neighbouring councils the possibility of a joint approach.

A Member referred to the changing landscape of public sector services and the expectation that the community sector would fill the void, however this would not happen without some effort to ensure the necessary infrastructure was in place. He was anxious that such support was not cut off until other support or funding opportunities were identified.

Scrutiny Committee – Economy endorsed the following:-

- (1) that the City Council would continue to fund business support for social enterprises up to 30 June 2014 and that officers be authorised to negotiate a service level agreement for this period of time with Fruit Tree for Business; and
- (2) that officers consult with neighbouring local authorities on the provision of support for social enterprises and that work continues to determine how best to support the sector going forward.

22 **Exeter Business Against Crime**

The City Centre Manager presented a report of the Exeter Business Against Crime initiative (EBAC). He provided a brief overview of EBAC including the membership as well as details of the types of reported incidents or crime. Since EBAC was launched in 2006, Anthony Couch, the Business Crime Manager, has been tasked with overseeing a reduction in business crime and specifically focused on deterring shoplifting and anti-social behaviour. More recently, there have been new challenges in relation to begging and more of a presence of 'professional gangs' operating in the

city. A Member referred to the sanctions imposed on those individuals breaking the law, but there should be some consideration over the level of support offered to those individuals. He hoped there might be an opportunity to carry out some wider scrutiny work in this area. The City Centre Manager confirmed that regular case conferences were held to discuss individuals committing anti-social behaviour which affected the enjoyment of the city centre. He agreed it was frustrating that so often the necessary support service was not there. A Member also compared EBAC's reducing crime figures between 2006 and 2013. The City Centre Manager stated that 70% of incidents have been dealt with by EBAC and the individual retail staff without recourse to the police.

The Chair wished to do more than note the report and requested that the Exeter Vision Partnership take up the mantle of the prevention agenda. The Chief Executive & Growth Director agreed that it was more appropriate for the Community Safety Partnership to discuss and take a collaborative view with their partners as a way of looking at the prevention agenda work differently. He would request a meeting with the Exeter, East & Mid Devon Local Policing Area Commander to discuss this further.

Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted and supported the: -

- (1) on-going work of EBAC and the significant contribution they have made to reducing levels of both business crime and anti-social behaviour; and
- (2) to request that the Exeter Community Safety Partnership look at ways to develop the prevention agenda.

23 **Christmas Market 2013**

The City Centre Manager presented the report which set out key issues arising from the 2013 Christmas Market and reviewed its impact. The Christmas Market, together with a number of other marketing initiatives, had contributed towards a successful Christmas period. He also identified some key issues to take forward for 2014, including working harder to ensure that more benefits would be felt by the independent traders, particularly in Gandy Street and Fore Street, as well as encouraging greater dwell time in the city. A Member also welcomed the more diverse range of products offered at the Market this year. The City Centre Manager agreed to look into the possibility of developing an Exeter Trail leaflet to encourage people to move around the city centre specifically for the Christmas period working with tourism colleagues.

Scrutiny Committee noted and commented on the positive contribution made by the 2013 Exeter Cathedral Christmas Market and would seek to support the development of the Christmas Market in 2014, with:

- further expansion of the Christmas Market – within the areas for which planning consent was given in 2013;
- a focus on ensuring a stall 'mix' that complements the offer provided by the City's independent businesses – particularly within the areas of Fore Street, South Street and Gandy Street;
- examination of opportunities for ensuring day and overnight visitors dwell-time in the City Centre is maximised, with encouragement to visit the key independent trading areas of the City Centre; and
- examination of the market layout to ensure visitors have as enjoyable a visit to the Market as possible.

24 **Update on the Exeter Visitor Strategy 2012 - 2016**

The Economy and Tourism Manager presented the report which updated Members on the progress of the implementation of the Exeter Visitor Strategy 2012-2016. The target remained creating and sustaining quality jobs within the tourism sector and to increase Exeter's national profile. An appendix to the report provided an overview of work undertaken within the previous 12 months.

A Member enquired if the recent flooding and poor weather had an adverse effect on advance visitor numbers for the Easter break. The Economy and Tourism Manager advised that she had spoken to colleagues at Visit Devon and advance bookings for the Easter break were down by £12.7million. Every effort was being made to encourage people to book now, and Visit England were about to run a national advertising campaign. She also responded to a comment about using new technology to promote the area and confirmed that she was in the process of developing a new fully responsive website for the Heart of Devon region. An issue raised by Members over the availability of booking seats with local train providers would also be picked up.

Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the report and:-

- (1) supported the actions proposed to be undertaken during 2014 – 2015; and
- (2) recommended that the Tourism Partnership be requested to change its name to Exeter and the Heart of Devon in order to give due prominence to the city in promotional activity and with Exeter being a Host City for the Rugby World Cup 2015.

25 **Report of the Topsham Parking Member Working Group**

Councillor Baldwin, presented an update, as the Chair of the Topsham Parking Member Working Group, on their findings. This had been formed after a 2,000 signature petition had raised a number of car parking issues in the town. The Working Group had looked at ways to improve the existing car parking offered against a background of physical and financial constraints. She provided an update on a number of proposals, by both the City and County Councils which were either being progressed or at varying stages of implementation. The work included increasing enforcement in Fore Street, Topsham to help maximise turnover rates of parking and easing congestion around Topsham School and the library.

One of the main concerns had also been the poor level of directional signage to the car parks leading to unnecessary traffic movement in the town. Devon County Council were pursuing these works in the 2014/15 financial year. Exeter City Council were also due to undertake a Parking Review during 2014 to consider future off street car parking capacity across the city. The results were expected to be reported early in 2015.

Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the report.

26 **Corn Exchange Update**

The Facilities and Markets Manager presented the report updating Members on the performance of the Corn Exchange. He referred to the good performance of the Corn Exchange despite a relatively small team and the many varied events including music, comedy, dances, conferences, exhibitions and examinations. The venue's financial performance was improving year-on-year and compared favourably with

other venues in the city and further afield. Staff were continually striving to find out who their customer was and improve event marketing. The Corn Exchange What's On page is now one of the most frequently visited on the ECC website and the mailing list and emailing list have grown considerably in the last few years. The events programme had been very successful financially and continues to improve. There is an identified need to improve the venue's box office facility, particularly for online bookings. He welcomed Members' comments on the quality of the events. A Member referred to the potential for development in that quarter in the next 15 to 20 years. The Events and Facilities Manager acknowledged that development in the future was a possibility but the restricted capacity was a barrier to this. The Chief Executive & Growth Director stated that, as soon as the upper part of the city centre around the bus and coach station is developed, then attention would turn to this area. The Facilities and Markets Manager said that every effort would be made to identify any opportunity to increase the venue capacity.

Members and the Chief Executive wished to thank the staff at the Corn Exchange for their all their hard work and dedication, as the staff certainly went over and above their duties to provide an excellent customer experience. The Facilities and Markets Manager thanked Members and would pass on their kind comments to staff.

Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the report.

27 **Matford Centre/Livestock Centre Update**

The Facilities and Markets Manager presented the report updating Members on the performance of the Matford Centre. He confirmed that the overall financial performance of the centre had improved considerably and well above the forecast made when the new contract for the centre was approved by Members. The animal throughput has improved under the new auctioneers and other business levels at the centre are also improving. He responded to comments on the success of the market regarding increased throughput and good prices being achieved for livestock.

Members also wished their comments on the hard work and dedication by the staff at the Market and Livestock Centre to be recorded.

Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the report.

28 **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 - Exclusion of Press and Public**

RESOLVED that, under section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the consideration of the following items on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3, of Part 1, of Schedule 12A of the Act.

29 **Minutes of the Exeter and Heart of Devon Growth Board**

The minutes of the Exeter and Heart of Devon Growth Board held on 16 January 2014 were circulated for Members' information, and referred to a number of issues that the City Council may need to consider and take forward as appropriate.

Scrutiny Committee – Economy noted the content of the Exeter and Heart of Devon Growth Board Minutes.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.50 pm

Chair