

STRATEGIC SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

23 September 2021

Present:

Councillor Luke Sills (Chair)

Councillors Allcock, Atkinson, Branston, Hannaford, Jobson, Mitchell, K, Pearce and Vizard

Apologies:

Councillors Buswell, Denning, Moore, J, Newby and Sheldon

Also present:

Deputy Chief Executive, Assistant Service Lead – Local Plan, Operations Manager (Public and Green Space) and Democratic Services Officer (SLS)

In attendance:

Councillor Philip Bialyk	- Leader
Councillor David Harvey	- Portfolio Holder for City Management
Councillor Duncan Wood	- Portfolio Holder for Leisure & Physical Activity
Councillor Rachel Sutton	- Portfolio Holder for Net Zero Exeter 2030

18 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 June 2021 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

19 **Declaration of Interest**

No declarations of pecuniary interest were made by Members.

20 **Questions from the Public Under Standing Order 19**

In accordance with Standing Order 19, two members of the public, Mr Cleasby and Mrs Hyde submitted the following questions:-

1. Mr Cleasby asked - Will the relevant Portfolio Holder please state the constituent elements of the Council's current plans for the redevelopment of the area bounded by Sidwell Street, Paris Street and Cheeke Street, and provide a report of progress to date in achieving those plans?

The Leader, Councillor Bialyk attended the meeting and gave the following response stating that officer time had previously gone into providing an update on this topic. He referred Mr Cleasby to that statement, which was as follows - *"The Memorandum of Agreement with the principal landholders has been provisionally agreed which provides for both a long term ownership structure of the site and for the joint promotion of opportunities as they arise. This will enable the Council and/or the principal landowners to select development partners or deliver elements of the scheme themselves. We are currently in talks with both the Government Property Agency and the University regarding their joining with us to deliver the first phase of development, this being the Exeter Civic Hub, where the City*

Council and public sector partners can create a vibrant city core, anchoring activity in the city centre and contributing to its continued resilience.

Mr Cleasby appreciated the confirmation that there had been no change since that earlier statement. He asked a supplementary question and referred to a comment by the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Culture relating to a Council grant for the Positive Light Projects to occupy a vacant shop unit in Sidwell Street. He suggested this would play an important role in reinvigorating Sidwell Street and could be the spark for other artistic and cultural initiatives to follow.

The Leader confirmed that discussions with the relevant parties were continuing and officers were committed to putting partners together to find a reuse of this site. The redevelopment of the whole of the City Point site was some years away, but he was confident that a plan would come to fruition.

2. Mrs Hyde asked - Does the Council propose increasing the removal of Graffiti which has proliferated throughout the City, are they in liaison with those responsible for the Bridges affected, road signs, and junction boxes graffitied, and are the Police trying to identify the culprits?

The Portfolio Holder City Management, Councillor Harvey, attended the meeting and gave the following response stating that whilst very effort was made to solve the problem, graffiti remained a significant problem for the city. There was no additional funding for the Council's graffiti service and with further central government budgets cuts forecast for the next few years, it was unlikely that we would be able to do so. He referred to the importance of graffiti removal, which is why a free service has been maintained for residents, even though it was not part of the Council's statutory responsibilities. The team is always busy and since 1 April 2021 they have removed over 700 instances of graffiti.

Exeter City Council are not the land owners for a large proportion of the structures that are vandalised city wide, with many owned by private residents or by other large organisations such as Network Rail, Devon County Council as Highway Authority or the Environment Agency. To enable us to offer a free service to residents for graffiti removal, we try to get other organisations to take responsibility for their own assets and remove it themselves, or fund us to undertake the removal with our in-house team. These, often much larger organisations, have their own funding streams and this approach maximises the amount of graffiti we are able to remove in the City. We are in contact with them regularly. The City Council works closely with the local neighbourhood policing team and the Community Safety Partnership over this and other associated anti-social behaviour. We also retain a database of tags which when combined with evidence from the community and our own CCTV system has led to a number of arrests. Evidence from the local community lead to three arrests recently following a spate of racist graffiti in the City. The problem is taken very seriously and we use our resources as best we can to tackle the problem.

Mrs Hyde appreciated that the City Council were doing as much as they possibly could but she sought clarification about the process for reporting when the lack of identifying marks on the structures made identification difficult.

Councillor Harvey appreciated that identification was a problem and reassured Mrs Hyde that officers were looking into a process to request those organisations to identify their assets so that any such requests for graffiti removal could be treated properly.

21 **Questions from Members of the Council Under Standing Order 20**

In accordance with Standing Order 20, the following questions were submitted by Councillors D Moore and Jobson respectively.

Councillor Moore asked the following two questions –

1. Can the Portfolio Holder provide details of the Devon Devolution proposals that the local paper says were sent to Government by local authority leaders in Devon?

The Leader, Councillor Bialyk responded and referred to correspondence on this matter between John Hart, Leader of Devon County Council from the Rt Hon Robert Jenrick, MP, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. Copies would be circulated to Members for information.

John Hart's letter outlined a broad indication of Devon's ambition for a county deal. Robert Jenrick's reply relayed a further change of the position of Government with regard to local devolution. Councillor Bialyk said that Devon's Leaders had already indicated their aspiration to create an economic county deal as opposed to a political county deal and a Memorandum of Understanding had been drawn up to that effect. Exeter City Council, along with the other Districts, wished to retain their political autonomy but could come together to share and benefit from funding opportunities rather than the prevailing method of local authorities effectively bidding against each other. Exeter, has been successful in a number of Government funding bids, but were now looking to establish more of a collective economic powerhouse for Devon with all of the benefits that might bring. He anticipated that a Members' presentation would be made at the appropriate time.

Councillor Moore thanked the Leader and referred to the level of unsustainable growth, and whether addressing climate change and dealing with the Ecological Climate Emergency would be considered as a top priority as part of any economic deal, and to clarify that an Elected Mayor was not included in the economic proposals.

Councillor Bialyk stated that climate change was at the heart of everything. He hoped to make an announcement very soon on the intention to lead on this matter with other partners, as it was clear that action was needed. He also confirmed that there were no plans for seeking an Elected Mayor, but rather that Devon's District Authorities would continue in a more collective and collaborative way.

2. In May 21 the 'Review of population estimates and projections produced by the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) was published by the statistics regulator in response to perceived inaccuracies for household projections in cities with large student populations.

As the ONS figures inform subsequent housing needs projections, please can the portfolio holder explain?

- a) If they have or will approach the ONS on this matter, and
- b) What actions they intend to take to ensure the housing needs data for Exeter is accurate.

Councillor Bialyk offered a prepared response on behalf of the Portfolio Holder City Development, Councillor Morse as she was unable to attend the meeting.

- a) The Council was aware of the review of the ONS population projections. Such reviews of methodology are not uncommon and are drawn to the attention of the ONS. On this basis, the Council does not intend to specifically raise this matter direct with ONS.
- b) In order to ensure that future housing needs for Exeter are assessed robustly, the Council has commissioned a Local Housing Needs Assessment alongside other Local Authorities in the area. This will provide the necessary evidence to support the preparation of the Local Plan in terms of housing provision required in the city. It should be noted that this will have to apply the standard method for calculating housing needs which is prescribed by Government. This takes account of the ONS projections but also factors in other variables such as housing affordability.

Councillor Moore advised that the ONS were looking for cities to come forward for review or to look at their data, and she was aware that Coventry City Council had taken that opportunity. She asked if Exeter would consider that opportunity.

Councillor Bialyk agreed to discuss the matter with the Portfolio Holder for City Development and the officers responsible to see if it was appropriate to do that.

Councillor Jobson asked the following two questions –

3. What plans are being put in place to consult Exeter's residents about Build to Rent to enable a policy to be put in place to assist planning decisions?.

Councillor Bialyk responded on behalf of the Portfolio Holder City Development and stated that the City Council was currently consulting on an initial 'Issues' consultation document for the new Exeter Local Plan. This is the first consultation for the new Local Plan and identifies a series of issues which the Local Plan should address and seeks views on them. This provides a good opportunity for the public and stakeholders to shape the content of the new Local Plan at an early stage, including in relation to housing matters such as Build to Rent accommodation. This is important because it is the policies in the new Local Plan which, when adopted, will provide the starting point for making decisions on planning applications.

Councillor Jobson referred to the Government guidelines relating to the need for a Local Housing Needs Assessment to enable evidence based planning judgment to be made for build to rent housing. She asked if the Local Plan consultation would enable that evidence based assessment to be made for what is needed.

Councillor Bialyk stated that the Housing Revenue Account building programme would offer homes for people who either could not, or did not wish to buy or who might not otherwise qualify for affordable housing. The City Council was minded to hear the views of such matters from local citizens and the Local Plan consultation would help contribute to that.

4. Have the results of the public consultation on the Exeter Civic University Agreement that closed on 14 August been analysed and if so when will they be made public and if not when can that analysis be expected.

Councillor Bialyk said that overwhelmingly, the vast majority of stakeholders consulted welcomed the development of a Civic University Agreement and are positive about its potential to build on existing activity, develop new activities to tackle the challenges that the City faces (especially as it recovers from COVID-19), and to transform the role that the University plays in civic life in Exeter and beyond. The general view is that the CUA is timely and would provide a huge opportunity to do more together for the benefit of the City. The concept has been met with an enthusiastic response tempered by realism over the difficulties of genuine civic collaboration and co-production.

A summary of the consultation response on the University agreement is available and would be circulated to all Members. The consultation had only finished in August and the University needed time to finish their work and bring forward a full report which would be made available to all.

Councillor Jobson looked forward to seeing a copy of the report.

22 **Petition - received in relation to the Protection of Green Infrastructure in Pinhoe**

Councillors Harvey and Wood attended the meeting as local Members to speak on this matter having given notice under Standing Order 44.

The Assistant Service Lead - Local Plan presented a report which reminded Members of the petition containing more than 2,000 signatures regarding the protection of green infrastructure in Pinhoe, which was submitted to Council in July and referred to this Scrutiny Committee.

The Chair invited the petition organiser, Kate Jago to speak on this matter. She thanked the Scrutiny Committee for the opportunity to speak and referred to the environment and biodiversity in Pinhoe which had been deteriorating over time. The community had been watching this happen with increasing anxiety. The petition had found support from people across Exeter, with contact made by other groups concerned at the scale of loss in their areas. She suggested a Ridgeline Park project would protect the distinctive landscape of the northern hills and connect across the city and beyond, to the city's valley parks and an extension to the Green Circle walk, to reach to the Greater Exeter areas of Poltimore and Cranbrook. This was an opportunity to safeguard these green spaces for local people and whilst there was already an amazing network of green spaces across Exeter, this would further develop the narrative of the City status and enhance the Council's reputation of being ambitious for growth, development quality and environmental enhancement.

Ms Jago suggested new policy frameworks should be explored for carbon offsetting and other nature recovery investment models. Natural England has already begun this process. Local Plan consultations needed new models of mapping and protecting green infrastructure to recharge the sense of civic participation. Councils could develop a new model for community housing, with local housing for local people alongside the Liveable Exeter and Exeter Net Zero plans. Exeter City Council had the opportunity to lead on this as it builds a new Local Plan and a Ridgeline Park would achieve these objectives. She asked Members to help create change to begin the process of priority that could uniquely shape this city in a new direction.

The Assistant Service Lead - Local Plan referred to the opportunity to discuss this matter and inform the early discourse on the Local Plan, currently out for consultation. The circulated report referred to the Council's existing planning policy, acknowledging the importance of our green infrastructure including in the areas north

of Pinhoe. This was already set out in our core strategy and our local plan review. Early work on the Local Plan will help to create a strong framework for the Liveable Exeter programme, and bring forward strategic brown field sites in order to create liveable neighbourhoods and avoid environmental losses such as areas like the north of Pinhoe. It was also relevant to bring in the work of the County Council and links to the city's Transport Strategy. The report also made reference to neighbourhood planning and neighbourhood activity which can also help inform local policy. He was keen to understand the views of the community and Members on this matter.

Councillor Harvey spoke under Standing Order 44 and made reference to Higher Field Pinhoe, and the Council's efforts to address climate change and green activity and biodiversity in its widest sense. Whilst the Council was bound by national legislation and guidance, it was important for as many residents and individuals to take full advantage of the opportunity to contribute with comments on the Local Plan.

Councillor Wood also spoke under Standing Order 44. He referred to the more recent timeline of the Monkerton and Hill Barton Masterplan, and the increase in development and traffic, leaving the community less opportunity to adapt. He was also aware that the application to build on Higher Fields, Pinhoe was the catalyst for the petition. The principle of the Local Plan would help shape the future pattern of development of brownfield land, higher density development in the city centre and smaller developments on the edge of the city which could be shaped more sympathetically to the green environment and the nature of local communities. The Local Plan consultation was due to end on 15 November and he also encouraged comments to be made via various links including the City Council's website.

Members made the following comments -

- thanks to Kate Jago for her excellent speech which was thought provoking and would enable an important contribution to the debate to the Local Plan discussion.
- the local plan consultation would address climate change and biodiversity as a priority.
- although there was protection of hills to the north and north west of the city in our current Local Plan, there would be review going forward. The Council was required to provide over 12,000 homes over the next 20 years, and to subject it to an imposition of development in the city would be the worst possible outcome. The Liveable Exeter Plan was a good approach and whilst it would mean a higher density in the city centre, it would be mitigated by limited car use and green space in garden city style developments.
- working within the existing planning legislation and framework, the sheer scale and pace of development in Pinhoe was noticeable. Efforts should be made to monitor incremental infrastructure and adhere to best practice to create the best possible environment for all.
- the Localism Act had enabled local communities like St James to have a say in the future of their local community and that opportunity should not be ignored.
- there was long standing priority of responding to the climate emergency and Exeter was a very green city. It had been voted the ninth green city in England, so Exeter's planners should continue to improve on this, notwithstanding the pressures to build new homes.

The Assistant Service Lead - Local Plan thanked Members for their comments and he encouraged everyone to view the Local Plan consultation document. Although the process was at very early stage, they were already at the point where many of the broad topics such as Net Zero 2030, landscape concerns, ecology, biodiversity, and

transport, health and quality of homes had been highlighted. It was also important to continue to address some of these issues with our partners such as Devon County Council as Transport Authority, Natural England and Devon Wildlife Trust. Local planning was a lengthy process and there would be the opportunity to engage over the next two or three years to also look at more specific local areas. He made a final plea for stakeholders and members of the community to take part in any future opportunity for consultation.

The Chair thanked Kate Jago and the ward Members for their contribution.

The Strategic Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

23 **Graffiti Service**

The Chair invited Councillor Vizard to make a brief introduction as he had submitted a proforma request to the Scrutiny Programme Board for a review to be undertaken on the graffiti service. The Board referred the request to this Committee.

Councillor Vizard spoke and advised that Councillor Oliver, had made the original suggestion at Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee but it was also thought appropriate to discuss the matter here. He welcomed the detailed report.

The Operations Manager (Parks and Green Spaces) referred to the challenging financial constraints faced by the Council, following Covid -19, which had resulted in the Graffiti Service being paused for nine months to enable budgetary savings to be made. The removal of the service, barring the cleaning of offensive material, quickly showed that the level of graffiti and tagging extended beyond the contained levels seen prior to the suspension, and had a particular impact on neighbourhoods. Complaints went up significantly in line with the increasing graffiti levels. The service was reinstated in April 2021 and demand for graffiti removal has remained high, with an excess of over 1,130 reports made via the Council's on line reporting portal. This discretionary service only had the capacity within the available budget for one full time graffiti operative.

Exeter City Council has looked to support the continuation of the free service to residents by working with other organisations and landlords and securing external grant funding. In terms of looking to the future, the community element of the 'Save the Streets Project' will look at prevention measures within the city and include further opportunities for mural art, and engagement with external organisations including utilities companies, and the community to identify where such measures would be the most effective.

A Member suggested there must be good examples of quality public art around the city and that could include graffiti, the 'quirky bird' art which appeared during lockdown was a good example of sponsored public art. Whilst, initiatives such as graffiti walls were unlikely to offer an outlet for the greater nuisance of tagging, which fostered an unacceptable downgrading of neighbourhoods and created negative anti-social consequences, he did appreciate that some opportunity to enable these perpetrators to release their creative energy might have an effect.

The Operations Manager (Public and Green Spaces) made the following responses –

- Exeter City Council does not routinely keep a profile or database of those who carry out graffiti or tagging. However, a database and photographic record of all tags that are removed is kept. This information on the Council's Firmstep reporting

system can be shared with the Police, and used towards any investigation and subsequent prosecution. A request would be made to Exeter Community Partnership to enquire if they maintained a similar database or could establish a database.

- grant funding was part of Devon County Council's ward funding and there was scope for further funding throughout the city whenever necessary.
- residents could still telephone and report graffiti on utility boxes or structures that had no identifying marks.
- a suggestion to work with schools, the College or University to explore the detrimental effects of graffiti on the community was noted, as was an exhibition of graffiti art to foster a better attitude from people seeking some recognition. The service was at the early stages of liaising with partner agencies, and whilst there was always scope for doing such activity in the future, currently the service was primarily focusing on removal processes.

Councillor Atkinson proposed that a request be made to the Exeter Community Partnership for any information held by the Police on taggers, and if a profile or database could be created. This was seconded by Councillor Vizard, put to the vote and was agreed unanimously.

Councillor Vizard thanked officers for the report and suggested the introduction of direct reporting to other agencies, at any time in the future, might take some of the onus off the City Council. He welcomed the Member's suggestion of a 'tagging database', to show a pattern or network of the individuals who were responsible for this.

The Strategic Scrutiny Committee noted the report and request to be made to the Exeter Community Partnership for the collation of a database of any information held by the Police on taggers.

24 **Forward Plan of Business**

Members noted the Forward Plan.

25 **Chair of Strategic Scrutiny Committee**

The Chair, Councillor Sills announced that whilst he would remain on the Scrutiny Committee he would be stepping down from the role of Chair due to his growing work commitments. He had welcomed the opportunity that the last four years had given him and thanked Members and officers for their support.

The Committee thanked Councillor Sills for his enthusiasm and focus.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.05 pm

Chair