

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

31 March 2022

Present:

Councillor Matthew Vizard (Chair)
Councillors Mitchell, M, Allcock, Atkinson, Denning, Mrs Henson, Pearce, Sparkes, Sparling, Wardle and Warwick

Apologies:

Councillor Begley

Also present:

Director Net Zero Exeter & City Management, Service Lead Housing Needs & Homelessness, Waste Collection Manager and Democratic Services Officer (HB)

In attendance:

Councillor Bialyk	Leader
Councillor Wright	Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder Council Housing Development and Services
Councillor Harvey	Portfolio Holder City Management
Councillor Ghusain	Portfolio Holder Communities and Culture
Councillor Williams	Portfolio Holder Supporting People

Councillor D. Moore attending under Standing Order No. 20.

1 **Ian Quance**

The Chair referred to the recent passing of Ian Quance who had been a Member of this Scrutiny Committee. He referred to his many qualities and passed on his condolences, and those of Committee Members, to Ian's family and friends. Members observed a minute's silent reflection.

2 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 2 December 2021 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

3 **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

4 **Questions from the Public under Standing Order No. 19**

No questions from members of the public were received.

5 **Homelessness Strategy Task and Finish Working Group Briefing Paper**

The Chair introduced the circulated terms of reference prepared by Councillors Denning and M. Mitchell for a Homelessness Task and Finish Working Group in order to review the current position regarding homelessness in Exeter and the impact of recent changes in Government policy, such as changes in Universal Credit entitlements

It was proposed that the review would input into the development of the Exeter Homelessness Strategy 2022-2025 as well as monitoring the development plan for the Strategy to ensure that all relevant stakeholders were appropriately engaged. As part of the development of the Strategy, it would review any Government changes in policy that lead to a negative impact on people's ability to maintain their accommodation and ensure that any appropriate mitigations that are within the Council's resource availability are included in the Homelessness Strategy.

The paper set out the suggested terms of reference and process for the Task and Finish Working Group, the Group to be chaired by the Deputy Chair of this Scrutiny Committee with six Members to be nominated by Group Leaders.

Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee noted the terms of reference with Group Leaders to be asked to nominate Members after the May Elections when new memberships of Committees were known. The Scrutiny Programme Board would be asked to set out a timescale for the review.

6 **Questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order No. 20**

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20, the following questions had been submitted by Councillor D. Moore and had been circulated in advance to Members of the Committee. In the absence of Councillor D. Moore at this point in the meeting, the questions were read out by Councillor Sparling. The responses of the Portfolio Holder are set out in italics.

Questions to the Portfolio Holder for City Management - Councillor Harvey

Councillor D. Moore

The Council has again won the contract from Devon County Council for weed control on the city's streets. Please can the Portfolio Holder provide the following information:-

A. The quantity of glyphosate that will be used to deliver this contract this year and for each of the previous two years.

Response

The Devon County Council highways contract covers two fixed sprays per annum over an approximate distance of 1,300 miles of public highway. The spray rate is specifically calibrated for the correct application at 8kph over that fixed distance, and therefore there is no significant variance in glyphosate levels used year on year. The Council reduced the spraying frequency from three sprays down to two sprays in 2020 and the results were acceptable. The Council continued with two sprays in 2021 and levels of use were approximately 648 litres for the full contract, this is based on driver recorded litres used. The base data for 2020 is available but usage levels were not calculated due to ongoing staffing shortages as a result of the pandemic, but levels will be similar to 2021.

B. Outside of this contract, the quantity of glyphosate used by the Council this year, and for each for the past two years, and what measures you plan to reduce its use.

Response

As with question A, no final usage figures have been collated for 2020 (although the base data has been recorded) as the priority was on service continuity over the Pandemic. The Council have steadily reduced glyphosate usage outside of the highways contract over the last few years, from a high of 195 litres in 2017 to an estimated 90 litres in 2020 and down to 60 litres in 2021. There have also been no changes in efficacy or the costs of alternatives on the market since the last review in 2020 and they remained financially unsustainable in relation to current revenue budgets. With recent rises in the cost of glyphosate this may have changed and we will review this again later in the year when resources allow. This will be reported to this Committee in October.

Question to the Portfolio Holder for City Management - Councillor Harvey

Councillor Sparkes

How successful was the scheme whereby residents could opt out of weed spraying entirely on their street? Do you know the numbers that signed up?

The Director Net Zero and City Management responded that he did not have the exact figures but understood that the scheme had not been particularly successful.

7 Food Waste Collection: A Timeline of Plans and Decision making

The Director Net Zero Exeter and City Management presented the update report on Food Waste Collection. The report included as an appendix the report on Exeter Combined and Kerbside Recycling Services Comparison produced in June 2021 by Apse solutions. The Director's report set out the following:-

- timeline, original plans and how the Council got to where it is now;
- impact - the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic;
- impact - shift in shopping and waste habits;
- impact - vehicle testing and planning review;
- impact - the HGV/LGV driver crisis;
- decision to retain the current service model with added food waste collection;
- benefits of retaining co-mingled collections and added food waste;
- how the first phase of the food waste service is performing;
- next steps and challenges; and
- other related projects.

The Waste Collection Manager advised that the collection of food waste in the pilot area of Alphington had commenced and was progressing well. The service would start tipping in the City Council yard from 7 April 2022, in new sealed food waste skips, rather than a long trip to Greendale. This would free up some time and would allow the service to be extended to include additional streets in Alphington as soon as possible. He also referred to recruitment challenges and necessary upgrades to the depot.

The following responses were given to Members' queries:-

- due to a number of issues, it was difficult to anticipate when the full roll-out of the scheme would commence and how many rounds would be added. Future rollout was dependent on the availability of drivers, vehicles, tipping facilities and on the announcement of legislation and Government funding;

- at present, only small food waste skips were being used at the depot in compliance with the Council's environmental operating permit. The larger permanent food waste bays were being designed now by a specialist who would be retained to oversee the procurement and project management of the new facility, including securing a licence from the Environment Agency. The Environment Agency set high standards with regard to odour and fly/pest control and a sealed drainage system was required by the Agency to prevent food liquors etc. seeping into the water courses and sewers;
- in respect of the timescale for delivery, the Pandemic had caused a significant delay, added to which was the time it took to procure vehicles. Although vehicles were now rented, the cost of purchasing a single electric refuse vehicle was in the region of £470,000. It had not been possible to commit to obtaining new vehicles before assessing the impact of the proposed changes to waste and recycling collections which are subject to a much delayed Government consultation. The design of the vehicles would be progressed following the Government announcement in respect of waste collection generally, including the Deposit Return Scheme, although there was no indication when an announcement would be made. Once the uncertainty relating to the Government announcement was resolved, work could commence on re-purposing existing refuse vehicles if possible or purchasing new ones, as it would only be then when container size could be specified;
- the difficulty in recruiting additional drivers and loaders had been exacerbated by the imminent retirement of two staff members. Although the private sector hourly rates for drivers were similar to those of the Council, the longer hours on offer were often more attractive to employees, especially a younger cohort. For loader positions, the Council was competing against the rapidly expanding warehousing and logistics industry, where good rates of pay and the indoor nature of many of these jobs was very appealing;
- recruitment was also hampered by the high level of vacancies in the overall job market;
- although the current re-cycling rate of 27% was low, it was anticipated that it would rise to over 50% with the full implementation of the rollout. Whilst the current North Devon rate was 53%, this reflected a greater volume of residual waste collected. Future reports on the City Council service would reflect these metrics;
- the City Council charged other authorities for the use of its Materials Reclamation Facility (MRF) thereby generating a profit from the separated materials. This has had to stop for the time being as the MRF was too unreliable to guarantee the service. The proposed investment would modernise the MRF, increase throughput, improve recovery rates and make this service viable again;
- although the national pay scale was used, the individual rate for loaders/drivers was not nationally agreed. The pay rates for agency loaders was broadly similar, but greater for drivers. The number of agency staff had been reduced during the Pandemic for safety reasons and this level was being maintained; and
- the report included a schedule of frequently asked questions which will be included on the City Council web site as the most appropriate means of updating the public on the progress of the rollout.

The Portfolio Holder for City Management referred to issues around extended producer responsibility relating to the huge volume of packaging involved in food etc. deliveries to supermarkets etc. which was being examined by the Government. Because of the uncertainty surrounding the many issues referred to, he urged patience regarding the full rollout and asked all to commit to the agreed system and not seek an alternative which would incur additional costs and, potentially, reputational damage.

Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee noted the report and thanked the Director, the Waste Collection Manager and the Cleansing Services Team for their work.

8 Exeter's Clear Streets Charter Review

The Director Net Zero Exeter and City Management presented the report on the Exeter Clear Street Charter Review. The Charter had been adopted by Devon County Council and Exeter City Council in 2018 and the report set out the responsibilities of both and who manages which issue.

The highest profile issue was advertising boards (A Boards) which were one of the most common annoyances for disabled people. A Boards were managed under highway legislation by the County Council as Highway Authority. No business had a right to put an obstruction on the public highway but the County and City Councils had recognised the need for businesses to advertise, especially in the current climate and, due to the reduced levels of pedestrian activity following the lock down, there had been a reluctance to enforce too strongly the promotion of businesses in the city centre.

The Deputy Chair referred to a statement and photographs provided by Peter Hill and circulated to Members, Peter, a former Councillor, having submitted a question to the previous meeting of this Committee on this issue. Peter had also raised the issue of the Street Charter and, specifically, A Boards at the January meeting of the Exeter Highways and Traffic Orders Committee (HATOC). The County Council's Neighbourhood Highways Manager had advised that, with levels of pedestrian activity increasing after the Pandemic, targeted inspections in the city centre would be increased to identify and remove obstructions.

The Director advised that one of the City Council's most important contributions to the Charter was the design of public open spaces, for example, a contrast in the colour of paving where there is a change of level. These principles had been adopted on recent developments at the bus station and St Sidwell's Point and would be continued for the development of CityPoint. The City Council, through its street cleansing crews, also flagged up issues for action. The Director also referred to the criteria for electric charging points to ensure they were not a hazard and advised that information on the Charter was disseminated via the County Council website.

Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee noted the report.

9 Forward Plan of Business

Members noted the Forward Plan.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.37 pm

Chair