

STRATEGIC SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

17 November 2022

Present:

Councillor Rob Hannaford (Chair)

Councillors Allcock, Asvachin, Atkinson, Harvey, Jobson, Knott, Mitchell, K, Moore, J, Oliver, Read and Vizard

Apologies:

Councillors Leadbetter and Branston

Also present:

Director of Culture, Leisure and Tourism, Service Lead - Net Zero, Commercialisation, Skills, Business and City Centre and Democratic Services Officer (SLS)

In attendance:

Councillor Philip Bialyk	-	Leader
Councillor Laura Wright	-	Portfolio Holder Arts, Culture & Corporate Services
Councillor Josie Parkhouse	-	Portfolio Holder Leisure & Physical Activity
Councillor Duncan Wood	-	Portfolio Holder Climate Change

23 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 September 2022 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

24 Declaration of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

25 Questions from the Public Under Standing Order No.19

No questions from Members of the public were received.

26 Questions from Members of the Council Under Standing Order No.20

No questions from Members were received.

27 Portfolio Holder Report

Councillor Wright reported on the Arts, Culture and Corporate Services areas of her Portfolio and detailed the issues relating to achieving the Council's published priorities, major ongoing programmes of work, issues impacting delivery, financial performance, budget requirements and potential changes being considered.

The Portfolio Holder referred to the following areas:-

- the One Exeter Programme was contributing to the work on identifying the potential savings that were needed working with the Senior Management Board. A Briefing on the budget would be held for all Members in January;
- Arts Council funding had awarded five of the city's National Portfolio Organisations (NPO's) with another three years of funding;
- the Devon Housing Task force which included the Leaders and Members of the Devon authorities was working strategically on the housing crisis in the south west, and offered an opportunity to lobby Government for more investment in social housing. A copy of the letter written to Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities would be circulated to members of the Scrutiny Committee for information;
- the investment in more staff in the city's CCTV Control Room along with the Safety Partnership with the University of Exeter and Devon and Cornwall Police. She had raised an issue about response times to the 999 and the non-emergency 111 line; and
- the approval of funding to help roll out the preparations for the photo ID, will be needed in the forthcoming May elections.

The Portfolio Holder responded to advance questions received from Councillor Read, with the responses in italics:-

Can the Portfolio Holder explain more about the in year cuts that are being made?

There were no in year cuts being made. As per the budget monitoring reports, the budget for this year remained balanced. There was a process ongoing in respect of the 2023/24 budget which was looking to address a shortfall caused principally by the pay award, increased energy costs and increased rates with borrowing costs. The budget for the year was balanced, with ongoing work to balance the budget for 2023/24.

How many posts remain unfilled or are being made redundant this year?

It was important to note that no posts had not been identified for redundancy at the moment, but a voluntary redundancy offer was available. Any specific information would relate to individual members of staff.

There were currently 170 vacancies on the establishment, (with some covered by agency workers in Cleansing, Parks and Open Spaces). Work was taking place with the One Exeter Programme to establish how many places were vacant, but filled by agency staff.

Will One Exeter result in specific services being stopped altogether and which ones?

This was part of the work of the One Exeter Programme and there may be some amalgamation or a change of the emphasis in the way some services were operating. The work was ongoing and Members would be informed at the informal Member's Briefing in January, before being considered by the Executive and Combined Scrutiny Committee meeting and then at Council in February.

The Devon Housing Task Force has been running for a year, what have been its significant outputs and how will these benefit Exeter?

The Devon Housing Commission has been collecting data evidence on properties used as holiday lets, to share with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DHLUC). As part of this, a member of the Devon Housing Task Force attended an oral evidence session at a House of Lords Select Committee on 8th November which considered evidence on the impact of short term holiday lettings on

the supply of new homes locally in Devon. The Built Environment Committee had requested evidence to look at a correlation in the growth in short term and a reduction in long term lettings. It has been estimated that 75% of new housing stock was being lost each year in Devon with a move from long term to short term lets, and taking properties out of the rental market. The Housing Task Force would be lobbying this matter as part of a bigger wider package of measures which may be explored.

Can the Portfolio Holder explain the delay to installing the CCTV camera near St Bartholomew's Cemetery?

The installation of 26 high resolution CCTV cameras and associated infrastructure, was complex and took time and permission was required for working on the public highway and e agreements for installing in third party assets before getting to the installation phase. Initial work had been focused on the complete replacement of the command and control systems in the CCTV control centre, and the upgrades were needed to install those systems. Those works were now complete and the camera installation work had been running for approximately four months. Following the permissions, surveys and tree work to remove obstructions, four of the new cameras have been installed. With most of the upfront work now complete, the remaining cameras were expected to be installed by February 2023, which was only the first phase. The second phase was approximately 30 new cameras and would be focussed on some of the main pedestrian routes in and out of the City. The second phase was expected to be operational by May/June 2023.

The installation of the camera near St Bartholomew's Cemetery had been slightly more complex, because of tree management works to reduce the amount of foliage, which had obscured the CCTV camera. This work was also expected to be completed by February 2023 and the Portfolio Holder undertook to contact Councillor Read if there were any further issues with this.

What is the estimated number of voter ID cards that will be required to be issued and will the service be able to guarantee they will have the capacity to do this and within the timeframe set by government of up to 24 hours for applications to be made before voting opens?

Estimates vary regarding the take up of Voter ID from between 2% and 6%, which equated to 1800 – 5400 potential applications. Every effort had been made to anticipate the demand by seeking additional funding from the Council to underwrite advance planning and we are looking to recruit to an additional temporary post soon. However, at the time of writing, the notification due to be received in October, from the Government, setting out the expected funding was yet to arrive. The legislation had set out the latest time for applications as being six working days before polling day (not 24hrs).

The modelling had been for the worst case scenario and financial liability that Exeter might be left with and the Corporate Manager Democratic Services oversaw funding approved at the last Council which should cover the cost of this with the assumption that the funding will be covered by the Government.

How will you ensure that young people won't lose their right to vote as the government guidance on ID is aimed at those held by people, who are 60 years plus regarding the acceptability of bus passes

The Electoral Commission would be undertaking nationwide publicity to engage with the electorate setting out the new requirements. In particular, this would make clear which types of photo ID would be acceptable. This would also be supplemented by local publicity and by information contained within the poll card.

The Communications team at the City Council will also undertake targeted communications using social media aimed at younger people and Members were encouraged to communicate this widely when they were in their wards. There was a list of the ID that would be acceptable but that did not include student photo cards. She understood that data would be gathered to find it who is that going to affect, and the City Council would do all it could to ensure that all those who wished to vote would be able to.

What has been the level of voter fraud in Exeter in the last 10 years?

There have been no reported instances of electoral fraud at polling stations. This may only prove that none have been detected. However, no records have been kept.

The Portfolio Holder also responded to Members' comments as follow:-

- ward grants were available and had been given for cultural activities. Devon County Council grants were available as well.
- each National Portfolio Organisations (NPO's) had its own conditions attached with any impact measureable. The impact for the City Council would only be if any of the NPO's could not meet the conditions and the MPO would lose the next segment of that funding and impact on us as a city.
- there had not been the opportunity to discuss with Theatre Alibi their future plans but would help to signpost and see if there was any possibility of cross collaborative working. Devon County Council had made grant funding for their work in schools.
- the creative arts industry was one of the biggest income generators for the city economy. Information shared by the Service Lead confirmed that Exeter was the third biggest city in the UK with a creative sector industry bringing in income to keep the economy viable. It was difficult to measure particularly as so many worked on a freelance basis.
- she would send a note to the researchers from the University of Exeter to ensure that data collection on empty homes element was covered, and of concerns raised about property rented as an Airbnb's on putting out their rubbish at various times, as this had impacted on the community.
- a request would be made for as far as possible for data from all tenures, including those occupied by students would be collected across Exeter and Devon. She noted the comment made for any opportunity to encourage people living in Exeter with spare accommodation to help with the shortage for single and young people and those seeking accommodation whilst working on a temporary contract rather than just focusing on people who want long term secured tenancy does not make up the whole picture.
- social housing was a part of the Forum's discussions, along with all of the issues raised such as homes for Ukraine, the rent a room scheme for single people along with the overall housing crisis were all being discussed in this Forum. A comment on those local councils that were not necessarily housing authorities to work collaboratively together to identify the barriers was noted.
- following a Member request and as a Panel member she would pick up the findings in the recent report on 111 and 999 response times and the Police Force's management of registered sexual and violent offenders at the forthcoming Devon and Cornwall Police Crime Panel meeting. She would offer an update following this meeting on these particular matters.
- a push button Help Point run as part of the Safer Streets in the city initiative in Plymouth was part of an external communications company provision and would require planning permission. In Exeter as well as the CCTV provision, there was a safe space open every Wednesday, Friday and Saturday night from 11.00pm until

4.00am in St Stephen's Church on the High Street. There was the opportunity to use or charge a phone, order a taxi, obtain support from the staff and volunteers and receive first aid treatment. They would be seeking further volunteers in the spring to cover shifts and it was hoped that the work could be extended with a roving presence around the city. Other initiatives such as signs with the number of the CCTV control room to request a directing of the camera was also being implemented. At the request of the Chair, she would provide further updates on this work as and when appropriate.

- an enquiry on the liaison between the University of Exeter and the Students Guild relating to publicity on the ID Vote campaigns would be made.

The Portfolio Holder report was noted.

28 Commercialisation

The Service Lead Net Zero and Business presented the report which offered an update on work undertaken within the Net Zero and Business Service under the umbrella of commercialisation for the City Council. An appendix also set out the wide range of projects the team were currently leading on with a projection of gross overall income that could be achieved. The intention was to provide an update on activity to the Scrutiny Committee every six months.

A number of factors had affected the progression of recent activity including a period of furlough during the Pandemic and an extended sickness period of the Commercial Manager, and an adjustment of the activity related to borrowing due primarily to the high level of interest rates. The Commercial Manager has been focusing on winning new contracts with an emphasis on waste and recycling; looking at the delivery of services differently and pursuing new and innovative ways to develop a new income stream for the City Council. He had spent some time negotiating with a number of local companies to win new contracts, but they were not forthcoming, in part due to other competitors in the local market. The report highlighted a number of projects being pursued with a significant emphasis on supporting and scoping new waste and recycling contracts using spare capacity to service the city. The gross values for the contracts were quoted, but following a Member's request, the net values for waste and recycling would be made available and would better reflect what value would be achieved for the Council.

A number of commercial projects were on hold due to officer sickness and the current economic conditions including higher interest rates, and increases in the cost of raw materials. Delivering commercial activity was very challenging, and going forward, meant a change of emphasis for the Commercial Manager on supporting existing services, though efficiencies or winning new contracts.

Members made the following comments, and the Service Lead Net Zero and Business gave the following responses to Members' queries:-

- that despite the Council's financially challenging position and the tendency to look inwards that commercialisation opportunities were not lost. *The current core of commercial activity continued to focus on working on waste and recycling, as the Council offered a good service with the businesses that the Council work with, due in part to being the Waste Authority and disposal of waste within Exeter contributed towards the Council's Net Zero ambitions in reducing carbon emissions. The inward internal focus remained, but working with the business community without borrowing or winning new contracts remained important.*

- identifying income as a target was not relevant as costs and allocated overheads might exceed income and not make a contribution to the revenue account. *A request would be made to the Service Lead for Waste and Recycling to provide net figures showing costs of contract delivery such as staff, fuel, hire of vehicles and maintenance taken into account.*
- were there any restrictions for any profit made on how it could be used in the Council. *It was anticipated that any surplus made would be used to reduce the bottom line to deliver a particular service and reduce the impact on the general Council's finances.*
- that Members could not adequately scrutinise the opportunities identified for commercialisation until there was an understanding of the availability of the spare human resources or property capital. *There was spare capacity, but whether that would change in the future would be a future discussion.*
- whether the suggestion of staff expanding their job roles would result in sufficient additional income stream. However, other opportunities such as deriving more income from car parking or the development of the Port Authority would be more than welcome, but whether more work on shared services would be undertaken. *Some services that are currently free, could be charged for, but more information was needed but Members should be invited to make suggestions and identify priorities. Although figures were not included as they were commercially sensitive, the potential projects were all areas that could be developed as appropriate and using any additional resources but doing things differently. Certainly, additional income could be derived from any further commercialisation of the waterways should the powers change. Shared services was being explored as part of the Exeter One Programme. The comments and suggestions about shared services made by Members would be discussed with colleagues. Car parking was now within her responsibility and a parking review was being undertaken to look at activity and potential savings to be made from looking at how they might do things differently and around utilising any spare capacity in car parks. The Chair suggested that when the Combined Scrutiny Committee met to discuss the budget, there might be an opportunity to explore the commercially sensitive aspects of the Commercialisation project work again.*
- the pros and cons of the role of the Commercial Manager versus commissioning specialist support should be explored, particularly in areas such as waste and recycling to maximise opportunities, and an enquiry about the timescales for the Exeter City Services web site. *The current post holder was on a temporary contract, and some of the work was quite specialist with technical advice required so consideration of whether more generalisation or more specialism would be beneficial was being considered. The rollout of the web site had been delayed due to the Pandemic, and the need for it to be built by Strata Solutions Ltd, the Council's IT Service.*
- that along with the suggestion of exploring other areas for income whether green burials could be considered. The Member also enquired about the current status of the Exeter City Services web site and whether additional money had been spent on relaunching the web site, the consultation on any changes to the Port Authority and whether a commercial food waste collection would be pursued when the residential food collection had not been rolled out. *The web site was designed but had been put on hold due to the Pandemic, as Strata will be building the website, there would be no charge. The site would be separate to the main City Council web site, offering an opportunity for further engagement with the business community to identify income opportunities. It was confirmed that any changes to the current arrangements in relation to the river and canal would involve a period of consultation in line with the Council's Consultation Charter. In a further response to the Member, the necessary infrastructure would need to be in place before a commercial food waste collection to the business community was offered.*

- a concern that the food waste roll out had been slow and there may be an equity issue if a residential property collection was not be in place, before the city centres' commercial establishments. The Service Lead confirmed that this would not be the case. The Chair referred to the progress of the food waste collection which would continue to be reported to the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee.

Members also discussed the city lottery suggestion and had varying views and whilst the promotion of gambling could not be supported, there was a difference between gambling which might lead to serious addiction and community lotteries to support the arts and local good causes. The Chair added that he was aware that other District Council's ran a community lottery and at least with that model some funding could come back into the local community. The Director, Culture, Leisure and Tourism stated that a report exploring the options of a city lottery was being presented to the Executive.

The Chair thanked the Service Lead Net Zero and Business for the report and anticipated that there would be further consideration as the projects were explored.

Strategic Scrutiny Committee noted and supported the following:-

- (1) work undertaken and planned within Commercialisation that supports the One Exeter Programme, as well as the City Council's Medium Term Financial Plan;
- (2) with activity to be adjusted to support services to increase income, rather than activity that requires borrowing – 'invest to save' – to deliver commercialisation; and
- (3) going forward, an update be presented to Strategic Scrutiny every six months, from November 2022 onwards.

29 **Forward Plan of Business**

Members noted the Forward Plan and Scrutiny Plan.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.35 pm

Chair