

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

28 March 2024

Present:

Councillor Matthew Vizard (Chair)
Councillors Rees, Begley, Fullam, Hannaford, Holland, Knott, Miller, Patrick, Sparling and Wardle

Apologies:

Councillors Atkinson, Harvey and Warwick

Also present:

Service Lead Legal Services, Service Lead Housing Needs & Homelessness and Democratic Services Officer (PMD)

In attendance:

Portfolio Holders: Councillors Bialyk, Pearce and R Williams
Councillor Moore

11 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 1 February 2024 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

12 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

13 Questions from the Public under Standing Order No. 19

No questions from members of the public had been received.

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

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20, the following question was submitted by Councillor Rees in relation to the Portfolio of Councillor Pearce who attended the meeting:-

“In Section 2 of your report, there is reference to the start of the new Wellbeing Exeter programme. Please could you provide more information about the progress of the transition (and challenges that as a Council we need to overcome), in particular, how we are progressing to secure funding for the enhanced model, so that all wards in Exeter can continue to benefit from this valuable service?”

The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homelessness Prevention welcomed the opportunity to speak about this issue and encouraged everyone to visit the Wellbeing Exeter website. He reminded Members of the context of the withdrawal of all funding from both Devon County Council and the NHS, resulting in a diminished programme. He further explained that:-

- the tender process for a new operator was not complete yet;
- the Council was working as hard as possible to raise other funding, including through philanthropic givers;

- negotiations were ongoing; and
- the Wellbeing Exeter relaunch was scheduled for June 2024.

Finally, he encouraged Members to ask him further questions at Full Council on 23 April.

15 **Portfolio Holder Update - Communities and Homelessness Prevention**

The Chair opted to take the report of the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homelessness Prevention as read and go straight to questions.

Councillor Pearce responded to questions from Committee Members as follows:-

Severe Weather Protocol for Rough Sleepers

- The rough sleepers who turned down offers of accommodation did so for a mixture of reasons;
- Sometimes people were not found after contact had been made; and
- Engagement remained the biggest challenge.

Community Lottery

- The attribution of grants was currently administered on an ad hoc basis at the moment but would be curated by the Grants Panel in the future;
- The new relaunch process was scheduled for May 2024;
- Grants would be awarded in alignment with corporate priorities;
- The Community Lottery website offered a detailed breakdown of where grants had been awarded;
- All the details of the administrative costs involved were featured in the original report which went to Full Council;
- Beside the administrative costs, it was worth noting that the lottery operative took all the risk;
- With a hundred community groups having signed up to it, the Community Lottery represented value for money and was about incentivised giving rather than gambling;
- While there hadn't been a tailing off of participants, their patterns had changed; and
- Some of the organisations who had scant – or in some cases zero – ticket sales would be given training.

Howell Rd Homeless Pods

- The pods had been vandalised in January this year;
- They had since been closed, repaired and relocated to a slightly different spot.

Refugee Schemes

- Exeter had been a City of Sanctuary for many years, taking in refugees from e.g. Hong Kong, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria...;
- There were many ways in which the Council could support refugees, through small grants but mainly through partnerships with organisations and structures such as the Devon-Ukraine Association, Inclusive Exeter, St Sidwell's Community Café among many others;
- The Hong Kong British National (Overseas) Welcome Programme was now closed and there was no current pathway for Hongkongers wishing to resettle in the UK anymore; and
- There was currently no resettlement route for Palestinian refugees but, if there was one, Exeter would be part of it.

Asked how Scrutiny could help his portfolio area going forward, Councillor Pearce replied that:-

- effective scrutiny consisted of more than just being quizzed by a committee;
- the task & finish group on homelessness had been useful, and anything that looked into an issue in that level of detail was welcome;
- 'Community Grants' was an area that deserved to be looked into;
- any topic was worth considering so long as it delivered genuine proposals.

On the highlights and frustrations of his tenure as Portfolio Holder, Councillor Pearce mentioned the following:-

Highlights

- saving Wellbeing Exeter (even though it isn't citywide at the moment);
- the Local Authority Housing Fund
- the increase in housing stock
- the Disabled Facilities Grant

Frustrations

- the lack/withdrawal of funding (e.g. Wellbeing Exeter)
- the lack of longer-term funding decisions from the Government.

Members noted the update from the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homelessness Prevention.

16 **Homelessness Strategy - six-monthly progress report**

The Service Lead - Housing Needs & Homelessness, in introducing his report, made particular reference to:-

- the pathway to making applications;
- the temporary accommodation service;
- the emphasis of the entire service on maximising prevention, involving mediation;
- the increase in levels of homelessness;
- the 10% increase in applications in the last 12 months (not just in Exeter but all over the country);
- the statutory "Duty to Defer";
- the impact of the withdrawal of funding from Devon County Council; and
- how the temporary accommodation numbers had doubled.

He responded to questions from Members as follows:-

- the additional funding from Government towards probation accommodation amounted to one full-time staff and there was no specific funding for accommodation;
- Exeter Prison definitely did have an impact on homelessness, especially with regard to rough sleepers;
- Exeter City Council was only aware of an inmate's release when the prison referred the information;
- verification of address for released prisoners was not a thorough process;
- the reality was that there weren't enough homes available;
- Concord House had been offered to ECC at one stage but it was unaffordable;
- he was not aware of any large developments being used to accommodate homeless people that had existing structural issues;

- the people being housed at the Great Western Hotel did have some breakfast facility provided and a communal kitchen was being discussed;
- the Great Western Hotel was currently at the highest level of occupancy;
- ECC would continue to use the Great Western Hotel for now;
- he did not anticipate a change of use application to be necessary for the Great Western Hotel but admitted that it was a short-term solution that had gone on for longer than planned;
- some hotels were not available for local authority use and some were subject to a strict cap of number of bookings;
- the Great Western Hotel's capacity was now capped regarding the number of rooms that could be made available to ECC;
- the figure of 11 homeless deaths was unfortunately accurate; the majority of deaths being people who were 'street-attached' and had housing as opposed to being street homeless;
- although toxicology results were not yet available, it was clear that synthetic opioids were having a serious detrimental impact on homelessness in Exeter;
- there had been an increase in drug education programmes;
- homelessness teams deployed naloxone (anti-opioid medicine used to arrest overdose) and testing strips for users to pre-assess drug components were being considered alongside collaborative work with local needle exchange outlets;
- the vast majority of accommodation provided were self-contained units with en-suite facilities;
- he was unable to give a number of children currently in temporary accommodation but advised that it was not high, and endeavoured to provide Members with the exact number;
- the Council was acutely aware of the need not to expose care leavers and young persons to exploitation and other risk issues and assessments did take place although it was not always possible to offer a 100% guarantee of suitable accommodation for a young person;
- the Great Western Hotel had 24/7 trained security staff;
- ECC was currently working closely with Devon County Council commissioners to increase bespoke service provision for young persons including care leavers ;
- every risk assessment was being undertaken to minimise risk of mixing the needs of household placements in temporary accommodation (e.g. modelling gender-specific / women-only housing) and, where this was not possible, ECC proactively sought alternative accommodation solutions;
- the loss of capacity caused by Airbnb did have an impact and there hadn't been any rent reductions in the private sector, but the Housing Needs & Homelessness Team had been lobbying the Government through the District Council Network; and Homelessness Advisory team; and
- he wasn't aware of any discussions having taken place to include homelessness units with co-living providers.

On the subject of no-fault evictions:-

- the Service Lead - Housing Needs & Homelessness confirmed that they did have an impact but there was little evidence that they were significantly on the increase; the exception being landlords withdrawing from the market due to mortgage / property loan affordability pressures;
- the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homelessness Prevention noted that, according to Shelter, the end of a short-term lease was the number one cause of homelessness;
- Members received confirmation that this trend was being closely monitored;

- the Chair remarked that being a landlord was a commitment; and
- the Service Lead - Housing Needs & Homelessness confirmed that the affordability gap in the private sector as well as the social housing sector was increasing and stressed the importance of the financial assistance work being carried out by team.

The Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homelessness Prevention praised the Housing Needs & Homelessness team and remarked that, in Exeter, no one had been homeless for more than six months, which was rare for a local authority.

The Chair invited Councillor Sparling to put in writing her suggestion that Co-Lab and St Petrock's be invited to a future meeting of this committee; her proposal would then be discussed at the next meeting of the Scrutiny Programme Board.

Members noted the report of the Service Lead - Housing Needs & Homelessness.

17 **Forward Plan of Business and Scrutiny Work Plan**

The Chair referred to the work plan and noted that the next two meetings had lengthy agendas. Councillor Sparling requested that, going forward, the committee be notified of all scrutiny proposals submitted by Members. This was agreed in the room and acknowledged by the Democratic Services Officer.

Finally, the Chair expressed his gratitude to all members of the committee for their contributions, noting that some would not be standing in the forthcoming election.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.04 pm

Chair