

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

5 February 2026

Present:

Councillor Catherine Rees (Chair)
Councillors Cookson, Begley, Fullam, Holland, Hussain, Payne, Pole, Read, Snow and Wardle

Also present:

Strategic Director for People and Communities and Democratic Services Manager

In attendance as Portfolio Holder:

Councillors Asvachin, Vizard and Williams, R.

100 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

101 Questions from the Public under Standing Order No. 19

The Chair advised that one question had been received from a member of the public, and invited Mr Paul Callan to ask his question:

“ECC complies with the Local Government Transparency Code 2015 by publishing details of over £250 spending transactions quarterly. Devon County Council publishes their figures monthly. I request ECC does the same so that the electorate can make informed judgements about ECC’s Local Government Reorganisation proposals.”

Councillor Vizard, Portfolio Holder for Climate, Ecological Change and Communities, provided the following response on behalf of the Leader:

“The Council is fully compliant with the Transparency Code, which requires publication quarterly. As a District Council, we have a smaller staffing resource than the County Council and therefore cannot move to monthly publication”.

In a supplementary question, Mr Callan asked if the Council would comply with section 58 of the Local Government Transparency Code 2015 and go further than the minimum requirement. Councillor Vizard advised that he would take this away and would share the response with Mr Callan and the committee.

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

The Chair advised that no questions had been submitted in advance, and no questions were asked at the meeting.

103 Portfolio Holder Report from Councillor Asvachin, Portfolio Holder for Housing Homelessness Prevention and Customer Services

The report was taken as read and Councillor Asvachin and the Strategic Director People and Communities responded to Members questions in the following terms:

Customer Services

- concerns regarding digital exclusion had been taken into account and it was possible that AI could be used to handle simpler enquiries, allowing operators to speak with residents unable to use online services;

- many residents had created MyExeter accounts to manage garden waste collection;
- a MyExeter account was not needed to respond to consultations;
- MyExeter was currently in a one-year pilot and data would be analysed, including to see where people made more than one attempt to create an account;
- an increase in accounts was expected when Council Tax became available;
- residents were encouraged to sign up and would be supported to do so when making contact with the council;
- MyExeter was used to manage garden waste collection, and there was a 97% sign up rate;
- Exeter had a low digital exclusion rate, but it was important to continue to monitor access across all channels;
- an increase in residents using self-service for routine issues would create capacity for staff to better support those with more complex needs or those choosing not to use digital channels for whatever reason;
- they were not aware of any plans to make other processes compulsory to a MyExeter account;

Housing

- eligibility for social housing was part of the statutory homeless assessment process;
- each local authority in Devon sets its own allocation policy social housing;
- Devon Home Choice, was the way allocations are administered;
- the trend in the increase in social housing complaints had been seen nationally and was actually welcomed as it meant residents were engaging with the council which helped the council to continually learn and improve services to tenants;
- part of the increase locally was due to changes that had been made to the complaints process. In the past some issues raised by tenants had not been counted as complaints but they now were;
- the housing benchmark data in the documents shared by the portfolio holder included data from non-local authority social landlords which needed to be borne in mind when comparing outcomes;
- where the benchmarking data shows slightly higher costs for repairs for Exeter this reflects different delivery models, for example, in Exeter these services were contracted outside the organisation so there were no hidden costs in overall budgets that might mask the real costs in providers who undertook repairs “in house”;
- Contract monitoring continued to be a focus to ensure on-going value for money;
- going forward there would be an annual plan published which would show a programme of more regular and varied methods for engaging tenants and gaining satisfaction feedback which was in line with the new Corporate Consultation and Engagement Strategy;
- regarding variation in performance for regular inspections, it was explained that there was a cohort of tenants who refused to give access and rigorous protocols were in place to address this;
- in some cases, voids were for longer periods of time desired and due to some long-term tenants having been reluctant to allow improvement and repairs to their homes. Consequently, when the properties became vacant they required extensive refurbishment which was being addressed by the Tenancy Services team who were required to ensure that all properties were inspected on a regular basis and that refurbishment and updates took place to ensure homes were of the best standard and to continue to look after council assets;

- a representative sample had been targeted for the residents' survey which was carried out by a partner organisation and was benchmarked nationally;
- trends emerging from the residents' survey were being looked at;
- Heavitree Squilometre was a brilliant idea but would be difficult to start in other areas as it was not easy to get volunteers;
- if residents had not had a response from the council their Councillor could use the councillor enquiry system to follow up;
- suggested that councillors could be given real time data on reasonable response rates regarding repairs in the future and that information about service standards could be made clearer. This would allow councillors to reassure council tenants' that their communication of repairs had been received. It was confirmed that it was not possible for Councillors to have access to individual residents' accounts for confidentiality and data protection reasons;
- the member enquiry process could be used if residents were contacting councillors regarding a perceived lack of response from the council;
- Many tenants currently preferred to telephone to report repairs but this took longer and often created long waiting times for customers. There was a quick access route via the tenant portal and work was underway to better understand why tenants use of the portal was low with the aim of improving overall response times;
- Stock condition surveys were undertaken and sanctions imposed where tenants have not looked after their property in line with their tenancy agreement; and
- the Head of Service Customer and Communities was undertaking a corporate project around complaint handling which would include automation, labelling and reporting.

During discussion a councillor stated that a 19 day turn around for repairs was very good especially given that contractors were difficult to source. He also stated that the Council Housing Development Advisory Board had seen data which had showed that compliance levels were excellent.

He also noted that any properties would be passed on in a good condition, but those which were not may have extensive damage.

104 **Six-monthly update on Homelessness Strategy**

The Strategic Director People and Communities presented the report making the following points:

- the government had published its long-awaited Plan to End Homelessness in December 2025 and its goals aligned with those established locally following the Council's own review work;
- a strategic data review was undertaken early in 2025 which identified systemic issues set out in the presentations but also offered potential solutions;
- historically homelessness funding streams from the government had been sporadic and short-term, which had hindered long-term strategic planning;
- issues seen in Exeter were reflected nationally, although the city had a notable population of younger, single people who were in a cycle of repeat homeless found Exeter a relatively safe place to be street-attached;
- the Council was not the only commissioner of supported housing in the city, the NHS, Social Services and criminal justice agencies also commissioned accommodation-based services;
- when the Council had greater control of funding in previous years, homelessness prevention outcomes were stronger;

- there was a lack of relationship with the private rental sector;
- phase one of the team restructure had been completed, and the remainder would be completed by the end of April;
- staff feedback suggested that a single casework service was desired;
- the ring-fenced homeless prevention grant was £750,000 less than modelled, however, the overall funding formula was generous;
- the budget proposal would show a wish to allocate an appropriate amount of funding to homelessness prevention;
- staff head count would be increased, with fewer senior managers and more frontline housing officers; and
- new burdens funding must be spent on staffing.

The Strategic Director People and Communities responded to Members' questions in the following terms:

- our transformation plans were evidenced based and it was envisaged that any future authority would want to continue this work;
- new legislation would enable more engagement with private sector landlords and tenants, with the council now mandated to undertake a mediation role to sustain and prevent breakdown of relationships and tenancies between private sector landlords and their tenants;
- there were new national outcome frameworks coming forward with specific metrics that reflected the stated outcomes our local plans were aiming to achieve such as the national target to reduce rough sleeping, by eradicating one-night rough sleeping and focus on long term rough sleepers who were usually individuals with complex needs;
- the new service would reduce fragmentation and stabilise staffing as it would have all case management workers together in one team on substantive contracts as opposed to the short and fixed term contracts the historic short-term funding had necessitated;
- service providers would be invited to provide feedback on the new service specifications and framework agreements prior to the commencement of the formal procurement process;
- providers could bid to join the framework which set quality standards and pricing providing a more cost effective and flexible approach for the council as commissioner as money would not get tied into block contracts and a provider not meeting the quality standards would not get any replacement frameworks. This had not been used in this area of work before in Exeter and the Council were following best practice used by other councils;
- in relation to question about money advice services it was explained that a new crisis resilience service would be commissioned with new funding from the government created from the remodelling of the National Household Support Grant which would come via Devon County Council. A specification for this new service would go out for procurement in due course;
- reducing the number of evictions for temporary accommodation and putting mechanisms in place to prevent the most vulnerable being put on the street would be addressed through ongoing casework support which would continue when someone was sustainably housed. Providers on the new framework would have additional responsibilities and incentives to mitigate evictions;
- there was an extract on page 35 of the report that calculated the cost of tolerating homelessness nationally;
- the belief that the homeless in Exeter were predominantly from other areas was incorrect, most had a connection with Exeter, if not, Devon. People came to Exeter from other areas in Devon as the city had excellent services and charities supporting vulnerable people;

- the prison early release scheme caused problems in the autumn as there was short notice and a high volume of releases;
- it may be beneficial for scrutiny to look at what other agencies within the city were doing; and
- a new national target which would be monitored was to reduce entrenched rough sleeping by 50%.

The Chair proposed an amendment, seconded by Councillor Payne to the recommendations in the following terms:

- recommendation 2.1 be removed and that progress be noted in September instead;
- 2.2 - remove “note the need to revisit” and replace with “contribute to the development of”; and
- 2.3 – replace “note” with “support”, with addition of “and the systemic issues and barriers to reducing homelessness and rough sleeping in Exeter.”

Following a unanimous vote, the recommendations as amended were **CARRIED**.

RESOLVED that the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee:

- Contribute to the development of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Prevention Strategy during 2026 in response to the National Plan to End Homelessness (2005) and new legislation; and
- Support the organisational and commissioning work already underway to start to address the new requirements and the systemic issues and barriers to reducing homelessness and rough sleeping in Exeter.

105 Scrutiny Work Plan and Proposals Received

The meeting was adjourned for a break at 7:26pm and resumed at 7:28pm.

The Chair proposed, to the approval of the Committee, that:

- Councillor Cookson contact Councillor Darling regarding the Eton Walk bin petition organiser;
- Public Surveys be brought to the June meeting;
- Little Exeter petition be brought to the March meeting if possible but the Democratic Services Manager would schedule accordingly after seeking advice from the Strategic Director for Corporate Resources;
- Community Safety Partnership report be brought to the September meeting;
- six-monthly Homeless Strategy be renamed Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Prevention Strategy; and
- Tenants Energy Review of our Passivhaus Council Homes be deferred to September.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.40 pm

Chair