

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

19 January 2010

Present:

Councillor Dilys Baldwin (Chair)

Councillors Shiel, Branston, Choules, Mrs Danks, R M Hannaford, Hobden, P A Smith, Thompson and Wardle

Director Community and Environment, Head of Housing Services and Head of Environmental Health Services and Member Services Officers (HB)

1 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 November 2009 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

2 Declaration of Interests

A Member declared the following personal interest:-

COUNCILLOR	MINUTE
Councillor Branston	4 (Board member of Age Concern)

3 Minutes of Community Safety Strategy Group

Members were informed that the minutes of Community Safety Strategy Group meetings would be circulated after each meeting to Members of this Scrutiny Committee to enable them to raise any issues of concern or interest at these meetings and, if necessary, request referrals back to the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) for a response. Members were also reminded that they could request individual agencies represented at the CDRP to attend a meeting of this Committee to answer any questions or address any concerns.

Members had no queries on the latest minutes circulated, those of 11 November 2009.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION BY EXECUTIVE

4 Equality and Diversity Strategy For Housing : 2009 - 2014

The Head of Housing Services presented the report seeking Members' approval for the Equality and Diversity Strategy for Housing 2009-2014.

He responded as follows to Members' questions:

- the Strategy Action Plan would be updated to include target dates;
- the Strategy did cover young people in a more general sense but there was also specific reference to young peoples' housing needs in the Homelessness Strategy. A protocol had been established with regard to the housing of young people in respect of relationships with other agencies, notably Adult and Community Services;

- the process for counting rough sleepers had been reviewed. At the last count in November 2009, six had been recorded, four of whom had been offered accommodation with the remainder requested to return to their area of origin; and
- a report would be submitted to a future meeting proposing a number of changes to the Homelessness and Housing Advice service to ensure each case was managed more robustly and everyone had a chance to review their housing options.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the report and requested Executive to:

- (1) approve the Equality and Diversity Strategy for Housing 2009-2014;
- (2) agree to the annual submission of a report on progress against the action plan; and
- (3) agree to the Equality and Diversity Strategy for Housing and its associated action plan being placed on the website and further comments invited from the community in accordance with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

(Report circulated)

5 **Housing Rents 2010/11**

The Head of Housing Services presented the report recommending a rent increase for council dwellings from 1 April 2010.

Rent convergence was a Government requirement for both local authorities and housing associations. The date for full convergence to be achieved had now been put back from the recent date of 2024/25 to 2012/13. It was noted that there would be an average rise of £1.94 per collection week for 2010/11.

The Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report and recommended Executive approve a rent increase for Council dwellings by an average of 3.1% from 1 April 2010, which included a general decrease of -0.9%, together with the phased introduction of the Government's rent restructuring proposals.

(Report circulated)

6 **Efficiency Gains to Domestic Refuse and Recycling Collection**

The Head of Environmental Health Services presented the report seeking support for proposals to improve the efficiency of domestic refuse and recycling collections for all households in Exeter.

A Member Working Group established to review the service had identified the following key options that would potentially yield most benefit:

- Moving domestic refuse and recycling collections from five days to four days a week;
- Increasing the number of households on a bi-weekly collection; and
- Moving collections from back alleys to front of property.

The Working Group felt that there was little merit in changing from back alley to front gate collection whilst there was strong public opposition. However, there was a consensus supporting a four day working week and change of collection frequency of those 12,000 to 14,000 properties suited to a bi-weekly collection. The methods of consultation were set out in the report.

Members noted staff concerns about the suggested changes particularly the potential loss of overtime payments and increased workloads of a longer working day. An initial meeting had been held with staff on 27 November 2009 when these and other issues had been raised. Management would work closely with Unison and staff to address all concerns raised and reach an agreement on any changes approved. The Director Community and Environment confirmed that consultations with Union and staff were crucial to the implementation of the proposals and, in this respect, there had been a good track record in industrial relations in the past.

The move from a five to a four day working week would require a significant remodelling of the collection routes and background work had begun on this, the bedding down process for the new system estimated to take some six to eight weeks. There would be no change in the 37 hour working week as, although there would be longer working days, the collection system was on a task and finish basis.

With regard to health and safety issues, it was confirmed that cleansing services were well versed in carrying out risk assessments and that the new rounds' capacities would be comparable to those of other authorities. The introduction of the new system would be closely monitored and it was likely that the rounds would be changed slightly over the initial weeks of operation.

In response to a Member, the Head of Environmental Health Services confirmed that new housing developments in the City had been factored into the proposed changes. Although ultimately, investment in additional staff and vehicles might be necessary, the increased efficiency that would result from the changes would increase capacity and enable additional developments to be absorbed in the short to medium term.

A Member expressed concern that, despite the extensive consultation exercise, many in the City might not be aware of the proposed changes, noting that the existing budget had been used to promote the proposed changes with no additional resources added. He suggested that there should have been direct mailings to residents. He also felt that the longer working hours that staff would be required to work could impact on their domestic arrangements.

In response to the Chair, the Head of Environmental Health Services confirmed that there would be a need to invest in a substantial number of new bins for those households where the weekly collection would be changed to bi-weekly and to fund a communication programme to inform householders of changes in collection round structures. These implementation costs amounted to £212,000 in total which would fall in 2010/11, based upon an implementation date of September 2010. It was confirmed that a communication programme would cost approximately 50p per household, compared with the £1 originally estimated.

Other Members welcomed the proposals, one referring to the successful implementation of changes to the refuse collection rounds in the past and to the successful introduction of wheelie bins. Another Member referred to the significant environmental benefits that were anticipated, in particular, a significant increase in re-cyclates and a decrease in landfill. She also acknowledged that the changes would be subject to the outcome of negotiations with Unions.

It was noted that the recommendations of this Committee to Executive would be subject to approval at Council.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the report and requested Executive to:

- (1) support the proposal to change the collection frequency of residual waste of suitable properties estimated at between 12,000 to 14,000 from one a week to once a fortnight;
- (2) support, subject to negotiation and agreement with staff and the trade unions, the move from a five day working week to a four day working week for the domestic refuse and collection and recycling service;
- (3) subject to (1) and (2) above, support the remodelling of the domestic refuse collection and recycling rounds; and
- (4) agree to capital expenditure of £176,000 funded from the capital programme in 2010/11, off set by the sum of £135,000 from the Vehicle Replacement Programme, to provide an additional requirement of £41,000 for inclusion in the 2010/11 capital programme.

(Report circulated)

7 Restructure of Control Centre Resources Following Review

The Head of Environmental Health Services presented the report on proposals for the restructuring of the Control Centre establishment following a review of Control Centre resources.

A Member expressed his strong opposition to the proposed changes and asked that savings be sought from other services instead. He believed that the use of CCTV cameras was of considerable benefit to the City, using the reduction in problems at football grounds as an example. In addition, CCTV evidence was often critical in court cases.

Members suggested approaching the Police either for funding support or for personnel. A Member suggested that seeking support with costs would be appropriate given that the Police used evidence provided by cameras in court. The Head of Environmental Health Services advised that the Police had previously declined to offer additional resources. He also stated that, as the Police could seize/demand evidence, seeking a charge for CCTV footage was inappropriate.

Another Member suggested that Land Securities could be requested to contribute. It was noted that they paid £33,000 per annum for use of the Centre for coverage of Princesshay and the Director Community and Environment explained that Land Securities also possessed its own control centre. The Head of Environmental Health Services replied that the payment received from Land Securities was considered appropriate.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the report and:

- (1) requested Executive to seek an urgent meeting with the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary, the Crown Estate, Land Securities and any other appropriate bodies with view to seeking contributions from them to keep the proposed cuts to the running of the Control Centre to a minimum, either through a

financial contribution or, in the case of the Police, contributing their own staff resources; and

- (2) requested Executive to approve the proposed restructure of the Control Centre resources and the prioritisation of work tasks, as set out in the report.

(Report circulated)

8 Review of Public Convenience Provision

The Head of Environmental Health Services presented the report setting out proposals for the rationalisation of public convenience provision within the City.

It was proposed to close the following conveniences:

- Blackboy Road
- Buddle lane
- Cowick Lane
- Ennerdale Way
- Guinea Street
- Hamlin Lane
- Higher Cemetery
- King William Street
- Musgrave Row
- Okehampton Street

He explained that there were significant annual costs in providing the current level of public conveniences predominantly in staffing costs, followed by the cost of utilities, such as water and electricity, business rates and consumables (soap, toilet rolls etc). The busiest conveniences were the most costly to operate and the overall annual budget of public conveniences was £420,330 in 2009/10, including central overheads.

The options of introducing entrance charges or closing all public conveniences and providing alternative provision via existing retail and food and drink establishments contracted to allow public use (a Community Toilet Scheme which some authorities had adopted) had been considered but rejected. Closure of a selected number of toilets had been felt to be the best option. The plans circulated with the report detailed the proposed closures together with the network of conveniences proposed for retention. The Head of Environmental Health Services clarified that the Whipton Village convenience would be maintained but that it was proposed to close the Hamlin Lane toilet. The proposals had been reached following an assessment against a table of criteria contained in the report but within an overall constraint of saving £60,000 and maintaining provision at local shopping areas and public parks. These closures would have a disproportionate negative impact on specific groups in the community as described in the Equality Impact Assessment which had been circulated to Members.

Members expressed their opposition to the closures, one recognising that whilst there was a need to identify savings, these should not be made at the expense of toilet closures. He suggested savings within other budgets. A local Member referred to the use of a number of toilets to the west of the river. The Ennerdale Way and Okehampton Street toilets for example were greatly used by cyclists, walkers, motorists and the John Levers Way allotment holders. He referred to the Musgrave Row toilets, also proposed for closure, which were used by Ring and Ride patrons,

as well as library users. It was noted that the library possessed toilets but that these were closed to library users and a Member suggested that the County Council be requested to make the toilets available.

Another Member suggested that the cemeteries budget should be utilised to ensure the retention of the Higher Cemetery toilet. Another Member remarked that closing the busiest toilets was illogical as was the closure of a number of toilets that had been refurbished within the last five years. He referred specifically to the improvements to the Blackboy Road toilets and it was felt that this was of particular value to the public during match days because of its proximity to St. James' Park and that its closure could lead to the use of nearby undergrowth surrounding residents' establishments. Another Member felt strongly that front line services should not be cut in this way stating that the proposal to close 38% of toilets which represented only 14% of the total budget was illogical. He believed that all of the toilets should remain open. He also did not feel that the use of toilets in shops and restaurants was an appropriate option.

A Member remarked that citing anti social behaviour as a reason for closure was not valid as such problems should be addressed by the Police and Community Patrollers. The Head of Environmental Health Services replied that abuse and vandalism of toilets was only one of the criteria. The Police had advised that their view was that most fans used toilets in pubs or at the stadium itself rather than the Blackboy Road toilet. The Police therefore were not concerned about the loss of this facility in respect of match day usage.

A Member reported that she had researched the operation of the Community Toilet Scheme in Richmond upon Thames and explained that local businesses worked with the Council to make their toilets accessible to the public, the Council providing financial support and ensuring that the toilets were maintained to an acceptable standard. Another Member suggested that the scheme merited further investigation to determine if it was a viable option. The Chair, referring to the differing culture of an area such as Richmond, stated that such an option was possibly more appropriate for a larger authority and that the associated costs were likely to make this an inappropriate solution.

In response to a Member, the Head of Environmental Health Services explained that those toilets that were to close would be protected from unauthorised entry and that there would be a cost in maintaining them in this way but that it would not be as great as the maintenance cost of keeping them open.

Scrutiny Committee - Community did not support the closure of the above public conveniences from 1 April 2010 and, in view of the impact of any such closure on this important front line service, requested that the matter be determined at Council rather than Executive.

(Report circulated)

ESTIMATES, CAPITAL BIDS AND FEES AND CHARGES 2010/11

9 Community - General Fund - Estimates/New Capital Bids/Fees and Charges

The Director Community and Environment presented the report on the Community Revenue Account Estimates and Fees and Charges, which outlined the strategic framework within which the estimates had been prepared, changes in accounting practices which affected all budgets and gave detailed reasons for major changes in the Management Unit estimates. Detailed schedules of the capital programme for Community were also attached to the report.

The Chair had requested a briefing note on the impact of a reduced budget on the street sweeping budget. The draft budget reduced the spending on street sweeping to a total of just over £1.27 million which was £50,000 less than the budget for 2009/10. There were 54 front-line staff providing these services, supplemented by a pool of five staff who provided cover for absences which included sickness, holidays and training. In addition, there was a substantial budget with which agency staff were employed to provide cover on days when there was insufficient pool staff. It was this agency budget which would be reduced by around 16%. This meant that some short term absences, for example, a single day's leave or a day or two of sickness would not be fully covered in future which could mean, for example, that an area normally swept three times a week might, on occasion, be swept twice.

The streets were regularly surveyed with a comprehensive performance indicator system in place which, alongside feedback from the public, would be used to assess the efficiency of the system with a view to introducing any necessary changes.

In response to a Member, who remarked that the street cleanliness varied from street to street and to various factors such as passing school children, the Head of Environmental Health Services confirmed that flexibility was the key in maximising available resources. The same Member remarked that the quality of agency staff work had been unacceptable in the past. Another Member suggested offering road sweeping duties to those staff losing a working day as a result of the reduction in the cleansing regime from five to four working days. The Director Community and Environment stated that the purpose of reducing agency staff was to produce savings and that spare capacity could not be suitably transferred in this way.

Another Member referred to cleansing work undertaken at Cathedral Green and it was noted that the annual cost for this area was £45,000. Of this, some £5,000 related to City wide vehicle costs and could not be easily disaggregated. The Dean and Chapter did not contribute to the costs and the Member therefore suggested that it might be appropriate to seek a contribution.

The Scrutiny Committee - Community:

- (1) noted the draft Revenue Estimates for 2010/11 and Fees and Charges for further consideration by the Executive; and
- (2) requested that an approach be made to the Dean and Chapter and other bodies for whom the Council undertakes cleansing and road sweeping with a view to a contribution being made to the costs of the service.

(Report circulated)

10 **Community Housing Revenue Account - Estimates/New Capital Bids/Fees and Charges**

The Director Community and Environment presented the report on the Housing Revenue Account Estimates and Fees and Charges, which outlined the strategic framework within which the estimates had been prepared, changes in accounting practices which affected all budgets and gave detailed reasons for major changes in the Management Unit estimates. Detailed schedules of the capital programme for Housing were also attached to the report.

She reported that, following the rejection of the City Council's Round II Bid for Council Own Build funding in respect of five sites, a meeting had been held with

representatives of the Government Office for the South West to seek an explanation for the decision. Although grant aid was normally distributed on a regional basis, on this occasion, the allocation had been made from a single national pot the result of which had been to allocate the greater percentage of resources to areas where the greater number of houses could be built at less cost. As such, areas such as the north east had benefitted at the expense of the south west. In addition, whereas Exeter had bid for support for smaller dwellings in support of its downsizing policy, assistance had been given towards the provision of larger family homes. There would be a re-examination of the proposed schemes with planning permission still to be sought. Some schemes could revert to the Sovereign Housing Association with the Council retaining the other sites.

The Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the draft Revenue Estimates for 2010/11 and Fees and Charges for approval by Executive.

(Report and Community and Housing Estimates and Fees and Charges circulated)

11 **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 - Exclusion of Press and Public**

RESOLVED that, under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the consideration of the following item on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part I, Schedule 12A of the Act.

MATTER FOR CONSIDERATION BY EXECUTIVE

12 **Play Development Service**

The Director Community and Environment presented the report setting out changes to the Council's Play Development service, including proposed financial changes and provided an update on the redundancy figures associated with the proposal.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the report and requested Executive to:

- (1) support the new arrangements for the Play Ranger service until 31 March 2010;
- (2) support the service reductions and other changes as set out in the report; and
- (3) seek external funding to allow the Play Ranger Service to continue into the future.

(Report circulated to Members)

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.20 pm

Chair