

PORTFOLIO HOLDER REPORT TO SCRUTINY RESOURCES

Six Month Update

The text in bold type represents the information previously sent to the Committee with the six-month update in italics.

Transformation Programme

Local authorities are under attack from many in the Coalition government, including local government ministers. Our response as a Labour Council is to transform the organisation, to ensure that it is ready to respond to the contemporary demands placed on us by our residents and customers. Some councils have outsourced services, where the imperative is to slash budgets rather than provide quality services. We believe a service mainly staffed by our own workforce is the model most efficient and responsive to demand.

This process started with the Senior Management Review which was concluded at the start of this year and I am pleased to say that we now have all of the Strategic Directors, Assistant Directors and Corporate managers in post.

We committed to introducing Systems Thinking to the council, to facilitate us in taking an outside-in view of the way we currently work. This has helped us to focus on what is important for our residents and customers and how we might reconfigure our services to deliver what matters to the customer in the most efficient way, stripping out unnecessary waste and duplication.

As a result of information and analysis since last summer, three reviews have been established:

- “Help Me With My Financial/Housing Problem” (with a view to broadening this out in the future to “Help me Back to Financial Independence”)
- “Maintain the City’s Physical Assets”, which is focuses on the maintenance of our Housing stock and Commercial Buildings.
- “Enable Good Development”, which focuses on Planning and Development.

As referred to earlier, these three reviews put a clear emphasis on refocusing our services around the needs of our customers and residents and stripping out unnecessary waste, duplication and bureaucracy. It is also about how we measure and continually review and improve performance. It is vital for the success of this work that councillors understand what we are trying to achieve and that we are also beginning to look at the way we review performance, make decisions and ensure that we are leading the focus on the best outcomes for our customers.

We remain committed to extending our opening hours. We are therefore looking as part of the review which relates to helping people with financial or housing problems, whether there is value in offering that service one evening in the week rather than on a Saturday morning.

A fourth Review is now underway, which is ‘Help Keep Exeter Looking Good’.

Colleagues are reminded that the Reviews that are currently taking place are not simply based on individual services within the Council. Part of the learning from our Diagnostic work has been to see our services as part of a wider System that affects our customers, for example, Planning, Benefits, Housing Advice. The Reviews described below encompass more than one of our existing services and are based on the Council’s new purposes as contained in our Corporate Plan.

A Member Briefing was held as part of the induction programme for newly elected members, to which all councillors were invited to share learning and progress in this systems review process. A further update briefing was offered last week.

Help Me With My Financial/Housing Problem

This review spans across the Customer Service Centre, Housing Benefits, Council Tax and Housing Needs. Members agreed in May to make the system normal; i.e. to make it a permanent system in the front end of the Council. Since May, work has been done to experiment how the System responds to volume and additional staff have been rolled into the System. This has involved a focus on taking new claims for Housing Benefit. Work has also been done to up-skill the Customer Service officers to deal with additional Council Tax enquiries in order to meet residents' demands at the first point of contact.

The 'Help me with my Housing Problem' aspect of the Review is well underway with check work having been carried out within the Housing Needs service, which has informed a redesign of front line housing advice and homelessness services. This work has also provided clear evidence that the Devon Home Choice system of allocating affordable homes by holding a large housing register does not best meet housing need and therefore does not help us meet our purpose. It will therefore be necessary for the council to consider its future within the Devon Home Choice partnership and the annual policy review (ending next May) will provide an opportunity to adopt a new system which does best meet purpose.

A significant element of the work has been to identify two interim operational leads for the work. These are Laura Fricker and Chris Hancock. Sarah Ward has now also taken on the role of Review Sponsor, alongside Bindu Arjoon. The Leads have taken on these roles from 1 October and have been focussed on re-establishing principles and method within the work as the redesigned system had deviated from the intended purpose (help me solve my housing / financial problem) as referred to earlier and this needed to be addressed. This work has been successful and it is expected that additional staff will be rolled into the system as we begin to generate the performance measures that confirm the System is working to its design. As part of this work, changes have been made to the layout of the Customer Services Centre to enable the design of the work.

Once the frontline service is properly established and a plan in place to increase the amount of demand being taken in this way, it is then the intention to extend the scope of the review into Tenancy Services and the Sustainable Lettings Service which are often critical to helping people solve their housing problem. The aim would be for this to start before Christmas although the redesign of the frontline system has taken longer than expected.

The next phase of the review is for the System Sponsors to identify the number and type of roles, including management roles, needed in the new system and develop a structure and budget for the new system.

Deliver Good Development

The Sponsor for this Review is Karime Hassan and the Review Lead is Andy Robbins. The team completed the "Check" phase which where they have learned about the thinking that underpins the existing system. The Team began experimenting with taking new demand in a different way; developing a holistic end to end approach through dealing with a range of new development projects from minor schemes such as domestic extensions to large mixed use development proposals. Acting more proactively than in the past, the team meets with developers at the earliest possible stage in order to better understand the issues and barriers to development and identifying the key issues to be resolved as the schemes make their way through the planning process.

The team expanded from four officers to six and continues to take on a wide range of new demand including a proposal for a new free school for 600 pupils and new residential development in Topsham. By eliminating the considerable waste work that was common in the early administrative phase of dealing with proposals, the team has been able to process planning applications much more quickly than previously. Similarly, by working more proactively with prospective developers and involving the right “experts” – whether they are from the Council or other agencies such as the Highways Agency, Environment Agency and County Council – the team have found that they can resolve key issues earlier. This eliminates the need to impose conditions on consents which in turn generate further work through dealing with applications to discharge applications which can also delay development schemes coming forward.

One particular example was the application the team dealt with for 58 houses at the former St Loyes College. The application was determined within 8 weeks – against a Government target of 13 weeks – and it was only necessary to impose four conditions. This will enable, the applicant, Linden Homes to make an early start on site which will deliver much needed homes and indeed income to the Council through the New Homes Bonus. Shortly after receiving the decision notice and just before confirming that the company would commence site clearance works within 10 days, Adam Davies, Linden’s Senior Development Manager wrote saying;

“That is fantastic, thank you ever so much for your help; it has been truly outstanding throughout and is greatly appreciated”.

This kind of feedback has certainly not been the norm in the past and counter nay possible perception that the Planning System being a barrier to economic development.

Maintain the Council’s Assets. *This review started on 1 October, following an interim restructure in the Housing and Contracts team to provide the management capacity to lead the review. Sarah Ward is the Review Sponsor and Lawrence Blake is the Redesign Lead. A full scoping document timetabling the review and its constituent elements is in place. Data is being gathered about how the work is done presently and how we maintain our building assets across the Council’s whole housing, commercial and civic portfolio. We are beginning to understand that there are a number of various “Maintain our Building Assets” systems across the Council that work in a number of different ways.*

Several issues are currently being addressed. More staff resource needs to be identified for this review across the council, particularly from Housing, Contracts, Finance, IT and Legal Services. A comprehensive asset register needs to be developed and mapped and contract information needs to be gathered and assessed. Driving flexibility into existing and new contracts is a key priority because in order to test any redesign of the system we will need contractors to be flexible in the way the work is done and might conflict with the existing contracts. More asset management information is required to measure the impact of the existing systems and the impact of system changes that will be introduced.

Help keep Exeter Looking Good. *This Review commenced in October and is being sponsored by Mark Parkinson with Roger Coombes and Robert Norley as Operational Leads. The focus of the review is on the 'looking good' aspect of the Council's stewardship of place - primarily cleansing, grounds maintenance and respective enforcement. The Review is currently within the 'check' phase where there has also been intensive data gathering on the demand on the services within this system and the level of resource, both proactive and reactive, currently being deployed to respond to that demand.*

In order to help determine what matters to existing and potential customers of the service, 5 focus groups of citizens and community representatives has been held as well as interviews with residents both on the streets and in open spaces. It is planned that progress and emerging issues will be shared with Members shortly.

Welfare Reform

April 2013 will see more changes for residents currently receiving Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit, and poses significant challenges for the Council in providing ongoing support. Council Tax Benefit is being abolished at the end of the financial year, to be replaced by a local Council Tax support scheme. Funded by a fixed grant, based on indicative figures released recently, for Exeter this amounts to a cut in Council Tax Benefit expenditure of 14%. The Council has a very tight timescale within which to establish a local scheme which protects the most vulnerable in society while supporting the work incentives being introduced through Universal Credit. Options for the scheme will be discussed shortly followed by a period of consultation. The final scheme must be agreed by 31st January 2013 to avoid a default scheme being imposed by the Government.

Although details have not yet been confirmed in regulations, based on information announced so far, residents will also be affected by other aspects of welfare reform, mainly the Benefit Cap and Social Sector Size Restrictions.

Benefit Cap – a limit on overall benefit income for individuals and households out of work. The restriction will be administered by reducing Housing Benefit payments putting responsibility for any resulting hardship on the Council. Exemptions apply for households in receipt of qualifying disability benefits, and the cap does not affect pension age claims. Around 50 households in Exeter could be affected.

Social Sector Size Restrictions – affecting Council and Housing Association tenants, a deduction will be made from Housing Benefit payments in cases where the claimant is considered to have spare bedroom/s. The reduction could be 14% of gross rent for 1 spare bedroom and 25% for 2 or more bedrooms. Approximately 329 Council and 730 Housing Association tenancies could be affected.

Colleagues may be aware that a report has been considered by Scrutiny Community and Executive about the impact on Residents and the Council of the continued roll out of the Government Welfare Reform Programme. The Council is doing as much as we can to publicise the impact to local communities, working with local partners like the CAB. We are also working on measure to mitigate the impact on the council itself in terms of the demand placed on our services by residents who are negatively impacted by the changes.

A report to Executive will recommend to Full Council the approval of our proposed Local Council Tax Support scheme. This scheme has been developed to respond to the Government's 10% reduction in the grant given to us to provide Council Tax Support. Members may be aware that pensioners are protected under the Government changes and therefore the impact of cuts will have to be borne by working age claimants.

IT

It is easy to take our IT resources for granted but like many organisations we are dependent on robust IT systems and expertise to support the delivery of our services as well as our internal communication. In order to ensure that we are ensuring that our systems are fit for purpose, we will be delivering key projects:

Network Upgrade – The infrastructure that operates at the heart of the council's network is now 10 years old. This key piece of equipment links together the file servers, PCs and printers and provides the communication hub for the entire network. The upgrade will provide resilience and will have an immediate benefit on performance, whilst ensuring greater capacity for the council's future ICT requirements, such as the Desktop Virtualisation project.

The core switches have now been replaced with a faster more economical solution. Work will now start on replacing satellite site equipment.

Desktop Updates - For a number of years, the council has operated a strategy where PCs are replaced if they are over 4 years old. However, as we strive to manage long term costs and provide a flexible working environment, we are developing a new approach towards how we manage the council's PC estate.

We will introduce 'virtual desktops' which means that we can increase our return on investment by extending the life of PCs. Virtualised desktops create a special environment on PCs where applications such as Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, PowerPoint etc), including corporate systems are 'published'. This allows older equipment to be used. Users will benefit from improved performance and flexibility. For example, it will be easier to provide access to vital business applications via mobile devices.

Another benefit of the virtual desktop is that they are managed centrally, which means ICT Services can better respond to user demands. Applications available in the virtual environment will no longer require a physical installation and in the event of any problems, PCs can be rebuilt in a matter of minutes. Users can quickly and easily work at any virtual desktop PC and if any applications are missing, they can be published almost immediately.

Proof of concepts have been completed on the available technologies, we are now at the user testing phase. Offices are testing the VDi solution over an internal wireless network and remotely. Application virtualisation has began and going through the testing phase.

Next steps are to finalise the Customer Service desktop and public access kiosks. Also we need to finalise the software licence model; this work has started and will be complete by Christmas.

Members IT Provision – Members currently have the option of using either their own PC or a PC/Laptop supplied by ECC to access their council email remotely via a secure portal and Citrix technology. The majority of the ECC laptops used by members are now between 4 and 5 years old and are in need of replacement. It is proposed to review the current IT provision by working with the Member Development Steering Group to consider the needs of Members and assess available technologies.

IT provision for members was discussed at the Member Development Group and will return to the next agenda where a member of the IT staff will attend.

Website review – We are working to ensure that that continually improve our website and intranet so that it can be effectively used as a way of communicating with our residents, councillors and staff. In order to achieve this, we are working to ensure that we have processes in place that allows information to be updated on the website as quickly as possible.

Intranet review – Following the staff survey, the role of the Intranet as a communications tool is being investigated as part of the staff focus groups. This will help us understand whether what we currently have is fit for purpose and what changes we may need to make so that staff see it as a key communication tool, alongside other methods such as City News.

Health and Safety

- We continue to strive to be an exemplar for health and safety by managing work- related sickness absence and encouraging sensible risk management.
- We maintain our commitment to safe working practices by ensuring that we are implementing the health and safety action plan that was approved by Employee Liaison Forum.
- We will aim to reduce the incidence of accidents and incidents through ongoing risk assessment and safety management commitment.
- *We continue with our commitment to health and safety as outlined above.*

HR

We are currently working to reframe the way that HR works with the rest of the organisation. In particular, we are moving towards a Business Partnering model where there is a specific adviser identified for each directorate in order that they might build more understanding of the service and issues they face.

Other key initiatives within HR include:

- Supporting the development of opportunities for youth employment, in particular the introduction of an Apprenticeship Scheme. The HR unit are currently discussing options with Exeter College, Bicton College and Plymouth College of Art to look at possible options for opportunities for young people with the Council. It is anticipated that a scheme can be introduced from September and dependent upon outcomes rolled out across the Council.

Three of our original six offered positions have been filled: two business admin appointments based at the civic centre and a cultural heritage operations appointment at RAMM, with a similar position still to fill. We are still working with Bicton College to make two horticultural appointments.

- A fit for purpose Council in respect of Council Structure, Systems Review work and service delivery; and employment policy and practice which underpins this supporting Employees through an immense period of change whilst maintaining and improving services to the public

The restructured HR department are working as a business unit on the development of employment policy to support the future operation of the Council:

- *A Dignity at Work Policy has been agreed, and we're working on manager and employee guidance to support this extremely complex and sensitive employment policy*
- *An A&D Policy will be developed which better supports managers in managing employees found to be under the influence or who come forward with dependency issues*
- *A recruitment policy and underpinning procedural documents*
- *A review of our Criminal Record Bureau arrangements and the posts which require disclosures in light of changes in legislation around safeguarding, and preparing for the re-branding of the CRB and ISA to the Data and Barring Service (DBS)*
- *Employment statistics are being developed to support workforce planning and meet our Equalities obligations in relation to published data.*

Civic Centre

- In order to continue to maximize the use of the council's assets, we shall continue to find suitable tenants for the remainder of Phase 3. Part of it is already being taken by the Children's Service of DCC. We continue to ensure that the offices are maintained to a high standard and are suitable to face the changes that will be brought about as a consequence of the various reviews across the organisation.
- The Devon Registration Service has been based within the Customer Service Centre from early June with the ability for marriages to take place here on a Saturday morning.
- *Devon County Council has, via its Early Years Service, taken over part of the accommodation in Phase 3 as well as its continuing use of other accommodation within the Civic Centre and Guildhall for its Registration Service.*

Democratic Services

- We will be running the Police and Crime Commissioners elections in November of this year (on behalf of Cornwall Council which is the Returning Authority) which has led to us realigning other work to an earlier than normal date (the annual electoral canvas will start two months earlier than normal) (leading to an additional cost as originally this election was to be combined with the May ECC elections and had been budgeted accordingly);
- *Despite the additional pressures placed on the Electoral Registration team over the summer months, it has managed to produce an updated Electoral Register much earlier than is normal, to allow the Police and Crime Commissioner elections to be held on the most up to date register. Preparations are also underway for next year's Devon County Council elections. A word of caution though, Individual Registration is due to be gradually introduced over the next couple of years which may require some additional resource - this situation is being monitored.*
- *Following an initiative by the chair of Resources Scrutiny and discussions which included the Leader, last Full Council meeting set up a cross-party task and finish Member Group to review the Council's scrutiny function. It is hoped that any changes suggested can be put in place and operate from next year's AGM.*

Communications

We have prepared a Communication Plan to enhance the Council's external and internal communication up to May 2014. This will:

- *ensure that members and officers are supported with their communication work*
- *publicise proactively the work of the Council and its services*
- *ensure an effective response to media enquiries*
- *raise public awareness of the Council's standpoint on important issues*
- *ensure the Council reacts to public opinions and attitudes*
- *improve communication with members and staff*

In a new initiative, from next month the Council's quarterly newspaper, the Exeter Citizen, will feature two pages of news from Devon County Council. There will also be two pages dedicated to Community News, which will give local groups and organisations the chance to promote their work and events.

Legal

- *At very short notice, a new standards regime was set up and approved by Council. This included the adoption of a new Members Code of Conduct effective from July 2012. Following a period of several months to allow the new code to embed, the Monitoring Officer is now working on improving and simplifying it so that it is more easily understood by all. This work will be supported by a training sessions to be presented to members and scheduled for December 2012.*
- *Legal work on the RAMM project continues and to as does work to prepare for development on the bus station site.*
- *Work continues opposing two Village Green applications relating to land owned by the council at Exhibition Fields and Mill Fields, Exwick. The Exhibition Fields application will be decided following a 12 day public inquiry scheduled to start in March 2013.*
- *We been very successful in dealing with a number of high profile anti-social behaviour cases as well as health & safety prosecutions. In addition to this, very many more routine littering prosecutions have been successfully undertaken.*