

## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

6 November 2012

### Present:

Councillor Shiel (Chair)

Councillors Mitchell, Branston, Bowkett, Choules, Clark, Dawson, Donovan, Laws, Morris, Mottram, Payne and Tippins

### Also present:

Strategic Director (MP), Assistant Director Economy, Assistant Director Environment, Assistant Director Business Transformation, Assistant Director Housing and Contracts, Control Centre Manager, Collections & Interpretation Officer and Member Services Officer (HB)

### In attendance:

Steve Barriball - Chief Executive, Exeter CAB

### In attendance:

Councillor Hannaford - Portfolio Holder for Housing and Community Involvement  
Councillor Sheldon - Portfolio Holder for Environment and Leisure

## 54 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 September 2012 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

## 55 **Declaration of Interests**

No declarations of interest were made.

## 56 **Exeter Citizens Advice Bureau**

The Chair welcomed Steve Barriball, Chief Executive of Exeter CAB to the meeting. Mr Barriball spoke on the services offered by CAB including the client profile and advice trends. He set out the likely impact of both Welfare Reform and Localism initiatives including changes to the Council Tax and the new Social Fund initiatives. He explained how these changes would impact on clients and how they would be delivered including a greater push towards digital delivery, monthly payment to households including rent no longer being paid to landlords and child payments no longer paid to the main carer.

CAB workload would increase significantly in both amount and complexity, exacerbated by cuts in Legal Aid. Face-to-face contact would remain the preferred method of communication and was particularly beneficial to clients seeking to appeal decisions of statutory bodies. The attitude of landlords was difficult to assess but increased enquiries relating to housing advice and benefit claims were expected. Benefits were now the largest enquiry area at 39%. There would be an increased

demand for debt counselling and income maximisation advice for those in financial difficulties. Changes in systems would require staff training.

Responding to Members, he advised that the true impact of the changes would not be known until secondary legislation had been published. He acknowledged that the drive to digitalise services could be problematic to those lacking IT skills and increased training and advice would be important, with Exeter CVS looking to provide support in this area. A joined-up service between the Customer Service Centre and CAB specialists was being piloted and Age UK and Shelter were other bodies with whom joint work would be explored as well as food-banks, where demand was expected to increase.

The Chair thanked Mr Barriball for his presentation.

### **MATTER FOR CONSIDERATION BY EXECUTIVE**

#### **57 Welfare Reform**

The Assistant Director Housing and Contracts presented the report identifying the anticipated impact of the proposed welfare reforms on both the Council and its benefit claimants. It also set out a risk assessment identifying the key risks for the Council and its residents, as well as setting out suggested interventions to mitigate the risks.

The impacts of the changes could be far-ranging, impacting on claimant's income in general and, specifically, on their ability to meet the cost of the house they lived in. There were potential implications for the Council's general fund and housing income and on the demand for certain services such as debt advice, council tax, benefits, housing issues and tenants' services. The impact on the Council's income and staff resources had been identified and mitigated but would need to be closely monitored. Many of the suggested interventions could be resourced within existing budgets and some transitional funding was available.

A Member referred to the percentage of households without a computer. In response, the Mobile Benefits Training Officer referred to research in local communities to identify the most appropriate locations for IT hubs for the public to go on line to access the benefits system and where support could be made available, including home visits where possible. Options for continuing with paper based applications and face-to-face meetings would remain. In response to another Member, she confirmed that literature and new bills should be ready by April 2013.

Members were concerned about the effect on both individuals and the wider economy and recognised that it was too early to accurately predict the overall impact the changes would have. However, there had been a noticeable increase in enquiries from concerned individuals.

Responding to concerns that the changes would lead to overcrowding, for example, three generations sharing homes, the Assistant Director Housing and Contracts assured Members that procedures were in place to meet the likely increase in housing enquiries and that each enquiry would be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Work was being undertaken with partners, including CAB, to ensure that the responses to the changes would be as flexible as possible with sufficient resources made available.

It was feared that the change in the local housing allowance would contribute to the private sector being unaffordable for individuals on benefits. There would be an increase in the number of claimants seeking social housing when private sector housing rents in Exeter become unaffordable. Members referred to the impact of the housing benefit income cap but it was difficult to determine at this stage how the affordable rent of up to 80% would impact on the private sector.

A further report on the impact of the changes would be submitted to this Committee in 2013.

Scrutiny Committee - Community:-

- (1) recognised that it is Central Government, through its programme of cuts and changes to the welfare benefits system, that is forcing Exeter City Council to urgently implement measures to help mitigate the effects that the reforms would have on both the local economy and the residents of Exeter;
- (2) noted the report and the implications of the Government's welfare reform programme on the Council's services and its benefits claimants and requests Executive to approve the proposed interventions; and
- (3) requests Executive to continue to monitor the Welfare Reform Risk Map and the effectiveness of the Council's response as further evidence emerges, and agrees to take appropriate action where possible to protect the local community from further financial hardship, reporting back to this Committee when necessary.

(Report circulated)

## 58 **CCTV Control Room**

The Chair welcomed Roger Crane, the Control Centre Manager, to the meeting. He spoke on a circulated handout detailing the role of CCTV in the City. CCTV had been introduced in the City in 2003 with the help, at that time, of significant Government funding and there were now 191 cameras with 25 in the City Centre, the majority focusing on car parks. The Centre also co-ordinated the Home Call Alarm system and the Out of Hours Service. Live camera evidence was invaluable, with the majority of incidents drink and drug related. The latter problem had increased significantly in recent years with national gangs increasingly active in the City. He referred to the "Giraffe bomber" and to another bomb incident in respect of the BT Centre. Camera maintenance was an issue as suppliers were often unable to provide necessary spare parts.

He invited all Members to contact him to arrange a tour of the CCTV Centre.

The Chair thanked the Control Centre Manager for his presentation.

## 59 **Reports of Portfolio Holders**

Councillors Hannaford and Sheldon presented progress reports on priorities within the Housing and Community Involvement Portfolio and the Environment and Leisure Portfolio respectively. Responses to Members' queries are set out below:

### Housing and Community Involvement

- it was anticipated that 46 units of social/affordable housing would be delivered in 2012/13;
- the figure of 26 rough sleepers were all single homeless and not families. It was feared that the Welfare Reform changes could impact adversely on this figure;
- partnership work with E.on for the installation of solar panels was at no cost to the Council with maintenance the responsibility of the occupier;
- negotiations were being held with the University regarding use of under occupied student units;
- Plymouth City Council was co-ordinating the Devon wide procurement in respect of disabled adaptations, this joint approach helping to reduce costs;
- the potential for funding residents to undertake further community initiatives to build on the Community Action weeks in Wonford and Countess Wear including insurance cover would be discussed with the Community Involvement and Inclusion Officer; and
- the overall achievement of targets was more likely where the Council had control over budgets and was not affected by changes outside its control such as the Welfare Reform changes.

### Environment and Leisure

- the total number of visitors to the Royal Albert Memorial Museum over the previous 12 months had been 317,777, representing over 1,000 visits a day, compared with 250,000 in the year prior to its closure;
- the systems review of the Parks and Open Spaces function under the heading of "Keeping My City Safe and Looking Good" included the role of Community Patrollers. The review of the use of playing fields and parks related to overall management and use of resources and not the provision of alternative facilities such as fitness trails. A presentation would be provided to the January meeting of this Committee;
- consultations with the Unions was continuing on fleet use; and
- issues raised at the Taxi Forum meetings were reported to the Licensing Committee.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the reports.

(Reports circulated)

## 60 **Parkwood Leisure Management Contract**

The minutes of the meeting of the Parkwood Leisure Services Working Group held on 25 September 2012 were received.

It was noted that a detailed report on the contract would be made to the January meeting of this Committee, with representatives of Parkwood to be in attendance. Members were advised that, although attendance at individual Centre Forums had been low, Parkwood were keen to increase attendance and it was felt that interest could be increased if the forums were themed around development issues or focused on single issues such as gym facilities. A customer survey had been undertaken recently and some 900 questionnaires were being analysed and would also be reported to the January meeting.

(Minutes circulated)

## MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION BY EXECUTIVE

### 61 **Tenancy Strategy and Tenancy Policy**

The Assistant Director Housing and Contracts presented the report seeking authority to adopt a Tenancy Strategy and Tenancy Policy as required by the Localism Act 2011.

Flexible tenancies would not be made in respect of existing tenants but given to most new tenants in general needs properties. Most flexible tenancies would be for five year periods but some may be for two years, for example, those who have committed anti-social behaviour. Although noting these issues, a Member felt that it was difficult for a social housing landlord to justify introducing these changes. Another Member, although accepting the proposals, felt that reducing security of tenure could impact adversely on stable family life and that to balance this change in policy, the Council should look to increase overall provision of social and affordable housing.

Scrutiny Committee - Community:-

- (1) noted the report; and
- (2) requested Executive to approve the new Tenancy Strategy and the new Tenancy Policy.

(Report circulated)

(In accordance with Standing Order 43(2), Councillor Clark requested that her name be recorded as having abstained from voting)

### 62 **Proposal to De-Accession items from RAMM's Collection**

The Assistant Director Economy presented the report setting out proposals to de-accession selected items from RAMM's permanent collection as, Exeter City Council, as RAMM's governing body was required to formally approve de-accessions. The report summarised the context, reasons and outcomes sought in de-accessioning these items and sought approval for the de-accessions.

The RAMM Content Management Lead advised that disposal was undertaken in accordance with the Museums Association Code of Ethics and that other public bodies were offered items in the first instance. Exceptionally, some items could be offered for sale. He stated that the programme of de-accessing was relatively small scale.

Scrutiny Committee - Community:-

- (1) noted the report;
- (2) requested Executive to approve the proposal that future recommendations and approval of items for de-accession be delegated to the Assistant Director Economy in consultation with the Portfolio Holder responsible for the Museums; and
- (3) a Museums Storage Facilities Working Group be established to comprise Councillors Shiel (Chair), Choules and Payne.

(Report circulated)

## **MATTER FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY**

### **63 Satisfaction with Housing Landlord Services**

The Assistant Director Housing and Contracts presented the report advising Members of the latest satisfaction survey for housing services and the service improvements identified to increase satisfaction with the service provided to tenants and leaseholders.

In response to a Member, the Assistant Director Housing and Contracts confirmed that a greater number of concerns were expressed by younger tenants and that methods of communication with them would be developed and implemented including use of social media tools.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

## **PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

### **64 Housing Revenue Account - Budget Monitoring to September 2012**

The Strategic Director advised Members of any major differences by management unit to the outturn forecast for the first six months of the financial year up to 30 September 2012. During this period, the total of the variances indicated that there would be a net surplus of £414,200 which would be transferred to the working balance as at 31 March 2012. This represented a reduction of £1,906,070 compared to the budgeted reduction to the working balance of £2,320,270. It was estimated that the working balance would stand at £6,178,623 at 31 March 2013.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

### **65 Community - Budget Monitoring to September 2012**

The Strategic Director advised Members of any major differences by management unit to the revised budget.

The current forecast suggested that net expenditure for this Committee would decrease from the revised budget by a total of £80,150 which represented a variation of 0.7% from the revised budget.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.35 pm

Chair