

## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

3 September 2013

### Present:

Councillor Norman Shiel (Chair)

Councillors Bowkett, Branston, Bull, Choules, Clark, Crow, Macdonald, Morris, Mottram, Payne and Spackman

### Apologies:

Councillor Mitchell

### Also present:

Chief Executive & Growth Director, Assistant Director Environment, Housing Operations Manager, Principal Accountant, Housing Benefit Manager, Mobile Benefits Training Officer and Democratic Services Officer (Committees) (HB)

#### 40 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 May 2013 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

#### 41 **Questions from the Public under Standing Order 19**

##### Social Housing

In accordance with Standing Order No. 19, questions in respect of social housing from Mr Duley were put to the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Customer Access. Copies of the questions had been previously circulated to Members. The questions and replies from the Portfolio Holder (in italics) are appended to the minutes.

##### Air Quality

In accordance with Standing Order No. 19, questions in respect of air quality from Sue Stephens of the Transition Exeter Transport Group were put.

Sue Stephens suggested that a more radical approach to reducing the reliance on the motor vehicle should be pursued. It was noted that sustainability was a key element of both the County Council's Local Transport Plan and in the determination of planning applications by the City Council as Local Planning Authority. Further to the declaration of an Air Quality Management Plan and publishing its Air Quality Action Plan, the City Council would be developing a Low Emissions Strategy and it was acknowledged that Transition Exeter would be a valuable partner in this work.

The questions and replies from the Assistant Director Environment (in italics) are appended to the minutes.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the suggestion of involving Transition Exeter as a partner with the City Council in progressing the Low Emissions Strategy.

The Chair thanked both Mr Duley and Ms Stephens for attending the meeting and putting their questions to the Committee.

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

### **42 Update on the Impact of Welfare Reform on the Council and Residents**

The Housing Benefit Manager presented the report informing Members of the impact of the Government's Welfare Reform and the associated reductions in welfare budgets, introduced in April 2013. She advised of an amendment to the report by the addition of the words "on collection" after impact in the second line of paragraph 14.0.

The Mobile Benefits Training Officer detailed issues relating to council tax support, the benefit cap, social sector size criteria and need for downsizing, changes in Council tax instructions from 10 to 12 months, local welfare support and discretionary housing payments.

It was noted that the changes were impacting beyond the Council into the Third Sector with a 27% increase in inquiries at the Citizens Advice Bureau in the first quarter of this year with a 78% increase in referrals to the food bank in the last 12 months.

The following responses were given to Members' questions:-

- there is a greater crossover of Council/agency staff with CAB and Homemaker representatives based in the Customer Service Centre to take referrals and a City Council officer located part time at Job Centre Plus to provide housing and benefit advice. The latter can also identify areas where practises could be improved;
- improved partnership work is also evident in other areas with strong co-operation with Devon County Council, the Police and Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue Service. Similarly, the Welfare Reform Action Group, with representation from many agencies, has also been a success;
- the City Council administers welfare support on behalf of the County Council; and
- the impact of changes to the Disability Living Allowance were likely to become increasingly apparent by October with the full affect of the Universal Credit Scheme to become apparent by April 2014.

The Chair and Members thanked officers for the comprehensive report and the hard work of staff in this transition period.

Scrutiny Committee – Community noted the contents of the report and, expressing their concern at the affect of welfare reform on the residents of Exeter, requested further update reports on the impact on both the Council and Exeter residents, including the potential impact of the introduction of Universal Credit.

(Report circulated)

## **PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

### **43 Housing Revenue Account - Budget Monitoring to June 2013**

The Housing Operations Manager presented the report on major differences by management unit to the outturn forecast for the first three months of the financial year up to 30 June 2013. During this period, the total of the variances indicated that

there would be a net surplus of £583,238, which would be transferred from the working balance at 31 March 2014. This represented a reduction of £1,128,922 compared to the original budgeted surplus of £1,712,160. It was estimated that the working balance would stand at £6,873,535 at 31 March 2014.

The Housing Operations Manager, responding to a Member's query, advised that annual checks were made in respect of gas central heating systems which included the testing of smoke detectors.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

#### 44 **Community - Budget Monitoring to June 2013**

The Principal Accountant presented the report advising Members of any major differences by management unit to the revised budget. The current forecast suggests that net expenditure for this Committee will increase from the revised budget by a total of £45,260 which represents a variation of 0.41% from the revised budget.

The current capital programme showed a total forecast spend of £4,249,531 in 2013/14 with £1,498,805 of the programme expected to be deferred until 2014/15.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

(Report circulated)

### **MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION BY EXECUTIVE**

#### 45 **Asset Management Review - Housing Garage Sites**

The Housing Operations Manager presented the report setting out the outcome of an asset management review of the City Council's garage sites and recommendations for estate rationalisation.

The report covered proposals for the re-development of garage sites, disposal, investment to ensure existing garages are fit for purpose, demolition and use for storage.

The Council currently owned 930 garages over 65 sites. Since 2009, around 60 garages a year had been vacant, representing around £26,500 in lost rental income each year. Despite several initiatives, the number of empty garages was not reducing. The garages had the potential to generate total income in the region of £470,000 per annum, depending on the type of tenant and the location of the garage.

A Member was concerned that the Council should maintain its stock of garages at a level which would enable the Council to continue to provide garage space to local charities and community organisations. This would be picked up during the consultation process. It was noted that the current processes relating to garage use were custom and practise and that there was no official Council policy.

Scrutiny Committee - Community requested Executive to:-

(1) support the report; and

- (2) approve the proposals set out in the report in principle for consultation with Ward Members and the Tenants' and Leaseholders' Committee and for detailed consideration by Executive in November.

(Report circulated)

#### 46 **Home Energy Conservation Report and Energy Company Obligation Funding**

The Assistant Director Environment presented the report updating Members on the Council's duties relating to home energy conservation and work being conducted on procuring an Energy Company Obligation (ECO) provider.

Responding to Members, he advised that a pan-Devon approach was the most cost effective method of procurement likely to yield greatest benefit from a provider and that, whilst some of the larger housing associations might engage an alternative provider, they could participate in the scheme. The procurement addressed local supply chains and local skills.

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

- (1) note the contents of the Home Energy Conservation report; and
- (2) agree to the proposed procurement route, as set out in the report, that is the Council select a partner for Energy Company Obligation delivery and co-ordinate delivery in partnership with that company including marketing support.

(Report circulated)

#### 47 **Local Air Quality Management Air Quality Action Plan 2011-2016 and 2013 Air Quality Progress Report**

The Assistant Director Environment presented the report updating Members on the Council's duties relating to local air quality management and work being conducted on Low Emissions Strategy. The report set out the four objectives of the Second Air Quality Action Plan and the three strategic objectives of the Low Emission Strategy which had been funded by DEFRA in the sum of £60,000 to identify and implement measures to reduce emissions and contribute towards the EU limit values, the project to be completed within 18 months. The engagement of a consultant would be funded from the above budget.

The Chief Executive & Growth Director emphasised the importance of a balanced approach to encouraging the economic growth of the City as well as maintaining air quality standards. He referred to the many transport initiatives in Exeter in recent years as part of Devon County Council's Transport Plans which had successfully led to the growth in patronage of public transport and stopped growth in car usage. Transport policy in the City reflected the City's importance as the economic hub of the area as well as the increasing number of homes that had to be built, both in the City and on the outskirts.

In addition to inward commuter/shopper journeys, a Member suggested that movements within and out of the City, such as to shopping centres, were also significant.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report and requested Executive to note the progress on the Air Quality Action Plan and to support the development of a Low Emissions Strategy to fulfil air quality objectives.

(Report circulated)

### **PERFORMANCE MONITORING**

#### **48 Parkwood Leisure Centre Contract**

Members noted that, in accordance with the Constitution and the responsibilities of the respective Portfolio Holders, in future, the minutes of meetings of the Parkwood Leisure Services Working Group would be reported to Scrutiny Committee - Economy.

The Chair thanked those Members of this Committee who had served on this working group.

The minutes of the meetings of the Parkwood Leisure Services Working Group held on 3 June and 15 July 2013 were received.

(Minutes circulated)

#### **49 Minutes of the Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Panel**

The minutes of Police and Crime Panel meetings were circulated after each meeting to Members of this Committee to enable them to raise any issues of concern or interest at these Scrutiny meetings. No issues were raised.

#### **50 Work Schedule Programme Meeting**

Members considered suggested topics for scrutiny as put forward at a scrutiny work programme meeting on 25 July 2103.

The Assistant Director Environment confirmed that he would be attending a seminar arranged by the Police and Crime Commissioner in September on alcohol related issues where he would be able to represent the viewpoint of licensing authorities. A Member suggested that the Commissioner was not fully appreciative of the significance of Exeter in a crime and policing context having focussed more on rural issues.

Scrutiny Committee - Community:-

- (1) agreed to invite the Police and Crime Commissioner to address a future Scrutiny Committee; and
- (2) supported the list of high, medium and low priority suggestions for future scrutiny work, noting that a programme would now be progressed in liaison with the Chairs of the three Scrutiny Committees.

(Report circulated)

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.00 pm

Chair