

## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

14 January 2014

### Present:

Councillor Norman Shiel (Chair)

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

### Apologies:

Councillors Mitchell, Choules and Crow

### Also present:

Chief Executive & Growth Director, Deputy Chief Executive, Assistant Director Environment, Assistant Director Housing, Assistant Director Customer Access, Corporate Manager Democratic and Civic Support, Housing Operations Manager, Principal Accountant (SR), Housing Options Manager and Democratic Services Officer (Committees) (HB)

### 1 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2013 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

### 2 **Declaration of Interests**

No declarations of interests were made by Members.

## ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

### 3 **Future Workings of Scrutiny**

The Corporate Manager Democratic and Civic Support presented the report informing Members of recent changes to the scrutiny process including changes in the operation of the three Scrutiny Committees and of proposed changes to future working in order to make the Committees more efficient and effective.

Some of the proposed changes that had emerged following a series of meetings between the Chairs and Deputy Chairs of the three Committees were:-

- a new style of agenda format;
- unless requested, officers would not present reports at committee;
- Members to provide officers with advance notification of questions to be asked at the meeting;
- Scrutiny Chairs to take a more active role in the Committee meeting 'pre-meet' to decide agenda content; and
- Portfolio Holder's reports to be considered prior to Council meetings rather than at Scrutiny Committees.

Councillor Macdonald moved and Councillor Payne seconded the following motion:-

“That the principles and concepts of the report be considered by all Members prior to a Council meeting, which would also provide an opportunity to trial the efficacy and practicality of Members meeting prior to the Council meeting to discuss matters, as was being proposed with regard to the Portfolio Holder reports.”

The motion was put to the vote and lost.

Councillor Bull moved and Councillor Bowkett seconded the following motion:-

“Scrutiny Committee - Community welcomes looking at further ways to develop the scrutiny process. However, the proposals in front of us come from the Chairs of scrutiny and has, until now, not been through a cross party process. At this stage the report may be subjected to numerous and conflicting amendments at the three individual scrutiny committees.

Previous proposed changes to scrutiny were done through a cross party working group and, therefore, a precedent for an appropriate process has been established.

We therefore recommend that Executive re-establish a cross party working group to look into this report and to bring back proposals to Executive and then, subject to approval, they be put before Full Council.”

The motion was put to the vote and carried.

#### 4 **Reports of Portfolio Holders**

Councillors Hannaford and Owen presented progress reports on priorities within the Housing and Customer Access Portfolio and the Environment, Health and Well Being Portfolio respectively. Responses to Members' queries are set out below:

##### Housing and Customer Access

- approximately a fifth of the City's housing stock was in the private rented sector, a quarter of which was of poor standard; the introduction of the Exeter Landlord's Accreditation Training Scheme was therefore a positive step;
- as provision of affordable homes remained a priority, the Council wished to continue its strong track record in this respect and to ensure that developers met the recently introduced 35% ratio of such homes in new developments. The Planning Inspector had advised that 35% of affordable housing was sensible;
- notwithstanding the proposed Council house rent increase of 3.7%, rent levels compared favourable to other areas and this was a central tenet of the HRA Business Plan;
- the importance of encouraging local, small and medium sized firms to tender for the various housing contracts was recognised;
- local Members would be advised of the consultation process with developers during negotiations for CIL contributions to local communities. There would be a focus on site related infrastructure and affordable housing; and
- the reduction of street begging was a priority, including the introduction of an alternative giving scheme, improved access to accommodation and treatment services for those wishing to engage and more robust enforcement. A poster campaign had been created to help educate the public on the dangers of giving cash to beggars and signs placed in car parks to advise that drug taking, sleeping

etc. is illegal in car parks. An agreement was being sought from the Police that they are committed to working with the Council on this matter.

### Environment, Health and Well Being

The Portfolio Holder explained that responsibility for the Parkwood Leisure contract had been transferred to the Portfolio Holder for Economy and Culture and that the Health and Wellbeing stream of work had been added to his portfolio.

- the County Council had agreed to allocate a sum of money for the Council to determine its own regime of grass and weed cutting and a meeting was to be held with the Assistant Director Public Realm to discuss further;
- an agreement had been reached with the taxi trade for continued funding of the Taxi Marshall Scheme on Saturday nights in 2014. At present, this could not be extended to cover Friday nights because of the cost;
- a Help Zone trialled on 20 December to assist the public late at night/early morning had been very successful with 16 people helped. A debriefing for partners including the Police, Health Workers, Street Pastors etc. was to be held when consideration would also be given to funding a continuation of this scheme;
- charging for the deposit of commercial waste at the recycling centre was appropriate. This was a County Council function;
- the proliferation of betting shops in the City Centre was of concern, especially as they were categorised as financial services under planning legislation which made the change of use to such shops relatively straight forward. It was hoped that a proposal at Government level to introduce stricter controls would be progressed; and
- the licensing regime could help control fly posting of events by licensed premises.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the reports.

## **ESTIMATES, CAPITAL PROGRAMME AND FEES AND CHARGES**

### **5 Community – General Fund – Estimates/New Capital Bids/Fees and Charges**

The Principal Accountant 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. A detailed schedule of the capital programme for Community was also attached to the report.

Since the reporting of estimates to the December meeting of this Committee, the employer superannuation rates for 2014/15 had been announced, with the increased cost of £130,000 being reflected in the revised draft revenue estimates.

Members noted the increase charge imposed for inspecting properties for immigration sponsors and to the £10,000 budget increase for illegal camping by travellers etc. The City and County Councils were working together on this issue.

Scrutiny Committee – Community noted the draft Revenue Estimates for 2014/15, the proposed Capital Programme and Fees and Charges for further consideration by Executive.

## 6 **Community – Housing Revenue Account – Estimates/New Capital Bids/Fees and Charges**

The Assistant Director Housing 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. A detailed schedule of the capital programme for Housing was also attached to the report together with details of the Council Own Build programme.

The increased superannuation costs had resulted in a £28,000 increase in the estimates. There had also been a £50,000 increase in the capital programme since the December meeting of this Committee for a new lift at 98 Sidwell Street.

The consequence of the Government potentially cutting short the period preparing for rent convergence by one year could be a loss of rental income of £185,000 a year, although this needed to be seen in the context of an overall budget of £19 million.

Scrutiny Committee – Community noted the draft Revenue Estimates for 2014/15, the proposed Capital Programme, Fees and Charges and Council Own Build for further consideration by Executive.

### **ITEM FOR EXECUTIVE**

## 7 **Housing Rents and Service Charges 2014/15**

The Assistant Director Housing presented the report recommending a rent increase for council dwellings from 1 April 2014.

An increase was proposed reflecting a general inflationary increase of 3.7% together with a convergence factor to reflect the number of years to rental convergence.

In order to achieve the Government's social rent reform, it would be necessary to implement an increase of 3.7% (RPI + 0.5%) with up to an extra £2 per week to facilitate convergence. For 2014-15, this would result in an average increase of 6% which equated to £4.09 per week over 52 weeks.

The Assistant Director acknowledged the importance of effectively communicating the increase and agreed that the opportunity should be taken to emphasize that the increase was necessary and reasonable and that tenants received very good value.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report and recommended Executive to:-

- (1) approve a rent increase for Council dwellings by an average of 6% from 1 April 2013 which includes a general inflationary increase of 3.7% together with the phased introduction of the Government's rent restructuring proposals;
- (2) approve a service charge increase of 3.7% with the exception of those charges set out below:-
  - (a) 3.2% increase in respect of cleaning communal areas in line with anticipated rises in cleaning contract costs;
  - (b) 0% increase in respect of communal electricity at Weirfield House;
  - (c) 0% increase in respect of water at Magdalen Gardens; and

- (d) the restructuring of charges in respect of communal gas at Sheltered Sites to reflect the number of properties per site and ensure an equitable apportionment of costs to better reflect consumption. No inflationary increase was proposed; and
- (3) an increase in garage rents of 3.7%.

**ITEM FOR INFORMATION ONLY**

**8 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.

The Chair reported that Tony Hogg, the Police and Crime Commissioner, had advised that Ian Ansell, the Criminal Justice, Partnership and Commissioning Manager would attend the next meeting of this Committee on 4 March 2014.

Members regretted the fact that the Commissioner was unable to attend in person as had originally been requested and that a meeting proposed for December of last year between the Commissioner and senior Council Members and Officers had not materialised.

Scrutiny Committee - Community asked the Chief Executive to again request the presence of the Commissioner at a Scrutiny meeting.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.47 pm

Chair