

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

17 June 2014

Present:

Councillor Shiel (Chair)

Councillors Newby, Branston, Brimble, Bull, Clark, Foggin, George, Holland, Mitchell, Morris, Raybould and Robson

Also present:

Chief Executive & Growth Director, Deputy Chief Executive, Assistant Director Customer Access, Assistant Director Environment, Assistant Director Public Realm, Assistant Director Housing, Housing Needs Manager, Technical Accounting Manager, Principal Accountant Service (PM), Scrutiny Programme Officer and Democratic Services Officer (Committees) (HB)

In attendance:

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| Councillor Rob Hannaford | - Portfolio Holder for Housing and Customer Access |
| Councillor Keith Owen | - Portfolio Holder for Environment, Health and Wellbeing |
| The Very Reverend Dr Jonathon Draper | - Dean of Exeter Cathedral |

20 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 March 2014 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

21 **Declaration of Interests**

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest were made.

22 **Dean and Chapter - Roman Bath House**

The Chair welcomed the Very Reverend Dr Jonathan Draper, Dean of Exeter Cathedral, to the Meeting.

The Dean explained the proposals for the re-excavation and display of the Roman Bath House in the context of the Cloisterplus programme and the wider vision of increasing the accessibility and understanding of the Cathedral's role and mission in the community and at the same time securing the fabric of this ancient and historic building. The development of sustainable income was seen as a key element to ensure that all those who visit the Cathedral enjoy the best possible experience and access as well as the fullest engagement with the spiritual, historic and cultural heritage of the Cathedral.

He enlarged on the proposals for the Bath House and surrounding Cathedral Green as well as the Cloisters themselves which would provide high quality facilities next to the Cathedral building, including a welcome centre, external shop, cafe and function area. The Bath House was one of the largest and oldest of its kind in the country and

was likely to attract between 50-100,000 visitors a year, therefore doubling the visitor figure for the Cathedral itself. The visitor centre and interpretation elements were in the early stage of planning and would incorporate interpretations of the Saxon and Norman eras as well as the Roman period with glazing to be placed on top of the Roman remains with public viewing platforms. The roof would be grassed to complement the remainder of the Green.

Discussions were continuing with English Heritage and a bid would be made to the Heritage Lottery Fund. Total cost and implementation date were unknown at present.

Members welcomed the proposals and the Dean acknowledged offers of support which would come from the Council, individuals, faith groups and institutions across the City. He confirmed continued use of the Green for annual events such as the Craft Fair and Christmas Market for which enhanced management measures would be developed to complement the new Cathedral Green vista on completion of the proposals. Maintaining an appropriate balance between the sacred and secular was paramount.

The Chair thanked the Dean for his presentation.

23 **Portfolio Holders' Statements**

The Portfolio Holders for Housing and Customer Access (Councillor Hannaford) and Environment, Health and Wellbeing (Councillor Owen) presented the work programme and broad priorities relevant to their portfolios for 2014/15. They would be working closely with officers to refine and develop these priorities over the coming months. The refined list of priorities for 2014/15, which would also include outcomes and targets, would be published in September 2014 in the Council's Corporate Plan. Also reported were the priorities for 2012/14 which had been reported previously and a list of priorities and initiatives which had been completed. Portfolio Holders' statements attached to minutes.

The following responses were given to Members' questions in respect of the Housing and Customer Access portfolio:-

- it was hoped that a Credit Union could be administered from the Civic Centre as part of the development of a community hub serving the whole of the City and not just focusing on City Council services, this philosophy being reflected by the imminent move of the CAB to the Civic Centre and the desire for social services staff to also maintain a presence in the Customer Service Centre;
- in seeking to deliver a full range of housing options, new solutions would be explored to provide affordable homes including co-operative housing and self-build housing; and
- with 25% of tenants in private sector accommodation, the move to licence HMO's was an important policy decision and, after consultation, a report would be submitted to the September meeting of this Committee. He stated that the Council had a moral duty to seek the highest standards.

The following responses were given to Members' questions in respect of Environment, Health and Wellbeing:-

- work was on going with communities and local organisations to maintain parks and play areas and explore new business models to protect them for the future. Sports clubs were already undertaking ground maintenance work for the King George III Playing Fields and others were coming forward with

other collaborative suggestions. A report would be submitted to the September meeting of this Committee;

- there was a need for realism regarding the potential for volunteer support, although Exeter CVS was a good source for identifying such resources. Potential grant sources would also be explored; and
- it was anticipated that the new enforcement regime, as detailed in the report to this Committee, would prove effective.

With regard to the allotment review, consultations were on-going and the deadline for comments had been extended to 4 August for a report to be submitted to the September meeting of this Committee. With a £43,000 deficit, the aim of the review was to reduce costs, improve management and generate income. Reference was made to meetings with Members in attendance and to liaison between allotments representatives on agreeing the way forward. A Member suggested the establishment of a Task and Finish Group to consider the responses received to the consultation but it was felt that there would be insufficient time to report back to the September Scrutiny meeting. The Portfolio Holder invited Members to respond direct to him with their views. He advised that new ways of allotment provision would be examined, for example, through the planning process and utilising existing park areas. He referred to Network Rail owned land at St James' Park station used as an allotment. He stated that he would also review the method of consultation.

ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

24 Council response on petition in respect of badgers

The Assistant Director Public Realm presented the report setting out the following e-petition of 232 signatories calling for Exeter City Council to prohibit badger culling on Council owned land.

We the undersigned petition the council to prohibit the culling of badgers on council-owned land and invest in vaccination programmes locally. We ask this because we believe culling to be inhumane, inefficient and unscientific. This is a national issue which will be of direct concern to the people of Exeter when DEFRA 'rolls out' its culling policy in 2014. The object of the petition is to ensure that Exeter's badger population is as safe as possible from slaughter and that the already available injectable badger vaccine against bTB is used in as many cases as possible. We ask this because we believe the culling policy is inhumane (DEFRA's measurement of 'humaneness' is to time the screams of wounded badgers), inefficient (previous culls showed an increase in bTB because of badger movement) and unscientific (the majority of scientific opinion hold that a cull will have 'no meaningful result')

Councillor Mitchell moved and Councillor Bull seconded a motion supporting the petition. The motion was carried.

Scrutiny Committee - Community recommended that the petition be supported.

25 Annual Scrutiny Report - 2013/14

The Scrutiny Programme Officer presented the report updating progress and work of Scrutiny for the period 2013/14 in direct relation to the appointment of the Programme Officer in July 2013 including a synopsis of Task and Finish Group investigations, a review and proposals for the Scrutiny system and timetabling/plans for 2014/15.

Scrutiny Committee - Community:-

(1) supported the report and were content with the progress and direction of Scrutiny over the past year, together with the proposals on direction for the forthcoming year; and

(2) approved the Annual Scrutiny report for public circulation on the Council's website.

26 **Housing Revenue Account - Final Accounts - 2013/14**

The Technical Accounting Manager advised Members of any major differences, by management unit, between the approved budget and the outturn for the financial year up to 31 March 2014 in respect of the Housing Revenue Account and the Council's new build schemes. An outturn update in respect of the HRA Capital Programme was also incorporated in the report in order to help provide a comprehensive financial update in respect of the Housing Revenue Account.

The 2013/14 financial year had ended with an overall net deficit of £327,077. This represented a decrease of £1,206,837 compared to the revised budgeted surplus of £879,760, of which a projected overspend of £1,037,024 had previously been reported to this Committee as part of the quarterly budget monitoring updates.

Members noted the Action Plan appended to the report setting out steps to be taken to reduce the £680,000 overspend that had occurred in respect of voids. The prolonged high winds and wet weather had resulted in an increase in the number of reported leaks, damp ingress and roof repairs in the last three months of 2013/14 which had led to a further overspend in respect of reactive repairs.

Council staff were proactively visiting properties when aware of potential maintenance issues as a by-product of other contact with the property, for example, by contractors.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

27 **Community Services Final Accounts - 2013/14**

The Principal Accountant advised Members of any major differences, by management unit, between the approved budget and the outturn for the financial year up to 31 March 2014 in respect of Community Services. An outturn update in respect of the Community Capital Programme was also incorporated in the report in order to help provide a comprehensive financial update in respect of the Scrutiny Committee - Community budgets.

The total variance for the year showed a deficit of £107,592 after transfers from reserves and revenue contributions to capital, as set out in the report. This represented a variation of 1.08% from the revised budget.

The Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

ITEMS FOR EXECUTIVE

28 **Review into the policy for allocating social housing - Report of Task and Finish Group**

The Assistant Director Customer Access presented the report of the Task and Finish Group convened by this Committee to review the Council's allocation of social

housing. The Group had been chaired by Councillor Shiel, other Members being Councillors Hannaford, Mitchell, Morris and Crow.

The following responses were given to Members queries:-

- criteria operated by other Councils for restricting accommodation offers to individuals with a local connection arose from local practise and related to specific policies such as requirements of Section 106 Agreements;
- the proposal for a system to remove applications where people do not bid for 12 months would include a six month trigger for staff to contact the individuals concerned to discuss if there were any barriers to their bidding;
- areas for potentially qualifying for housing in light of community contribution included;
 - employment within the area;
 - voluntary work (the standard used most commonly is 10 hours per month);
 - ex Services Personnel;
 - foster or community carers; and
 - those engaged in training or apprenticeships;

and further suggestions from Members were invited. This would also be picked up in the consultation;

- the system encompassed a more flexible approach with less emphasis on tenancies for life and increased use of private sector accommodation;
- rents were higher for temporary accommodation because of the higher management costs involved;
- the effective communication of the operation of Devon Homechoice and options available had always been a priority and would continue with proposed changes in the system, highlighted by the consultation process proposed on the suggested changes;
- consultation on Band E would be via the existing register, experience from Teignbridge District Council suggested that there would not be significant concerns. Other outreach methods would be required; and
- the Portfolio Holder referred to a recent tenant survey showing that 31% were either working full or part time with 7% seeking work, 9% not seeking work and 18% unable to work. It was proposed that the Council choose to prioritise working households for some properties, for example, in areas where it is identified that there is an over-representation of economically inactive households. Members supported exploring mechanisms to prioritise working households for some lettings, and targeting areas where there were a high proportion of economically inactive households.

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

- (1) restricting the eligibility for housing to those with an evidenced housing need within the policy and thereby removing Band E;
- (2) removing applications where people do not bid for 12 months or refuse three properties deemed suitable for their needs;
- (3) providing additional priority for working households and those who make a contribution to the local community;

- (4) only registering applicants with a local connection of two year's residence in Devon; and
- (5) agreeing a six week consultation period with households on the housing register, partners (housing associations, Devon County Council, neighbouring local authorities, voluntary sector agencies etc.) and staff on the above recommendations, the outcomes of the consultation to be reported back to this Committee and Executive for final decision.

29 **Resourcing Enforcement Services**

The Assistant Director Public Realm presented the report seeking approval to create an Enforcement Team for off street parking, illegal encampments, litter and dogs from existing staff resources. Reasons for a new team were:-

- reduced capacity and resilience as a result of previous budget savings;
- transfer of parking and enforcement staff to Devon County Council; and
- to ensure budget discipline in respect of illegal camping issues.

A Member expressed regret that a Task and Finish Group had not been established in June 2013 to examine some of these issues. The reduction in the out-of-hour service was of particular concern. As noise and anti-social behaviour were significant problems in certain areas of the City he did not feel that the previous re-assurances he had received would be adequately addressed by the measures proposed and the new system being established.

Other Members expressed the view that the City Council was increasingly taking on responsibilities of other bodies without appropriate recompense.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the report and requested Executive to approve the establishment of an Enforcement Team of five FTE's to be created from the current four Community Patrollers and the Environment Enforcement resource to focus on statutory and business critical enforcement work.

30 **Environmental Health and Licensing Statutory Services Plan - 2015/16**

The Assistant Director Environment presented the report seeking approval for the adoption of the Environmental Health and Licensing Statutory Service Plan 2014/15. The Plan set out the Council's regulatory function in respect of food safety, health and safety, licensing, Environmental Permitting and other statutory functions over the forthcoming year.

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

- (1) approve the Statutory Service Plan 2014/15; and
- (2) authorise the Assistant Director Environment to change the Plan in light of centrally issued guidance and/or to meet operational costs.

31 **Additional Licensing for certain types of Houses in Multiple Occupation**

The Assistant Director Housing presented the report seeking approval to enter into a ten week consultation period with relevant stakeholders on a proposal to extend the principles of Mandatory HMO Licensing, currently operated by Exeter City Council,

through the introduction of an Additional Licensing Scheme covering specific types of HMOs.

There were some 2,500 HMOs in Exeter of which about 700 were covered by the Mandatory Licensing Scheme introduced nationally in 2006. Mandatory licensing was restricted to three or more storeys with five or more tenants, typically shared houses occupied by students and properties that had been split into bedsits. Mandatory licensing did not cover rented properties in buildings which had been poorly converted into self contained flats or to the majority of flats in multiple occupation above commercial premises. A significant proportion of these posed an increased risk in respect of fire safety and were frequently associated with poor management and anti social behaviour. Introduction of additional licensing would assist in tackling these problems and further the Council's objectives of improving standards in the private rented sector. This proposal would also generate income and therefore help defray the significant resource cost required to address these problems.

A Member welcomed these proposals, confirming that some multi-occupied properties, including student occupied buildings, caused significant problems and were very poorly maintained.

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

- (1) enter into a formal 10 week consultation period with relevant stakeholders, particularly landlords, tenants, partner agencies and the public at large; and
- (2) support the submission of a further report on the outcome of the consultation to this Committee and Executive in November 2014, the report to also provide recommendations as to whether or not additional Licensing should be progressed.

ITEM FOR INFORMATION ONLY

32 Meetings of the Devon and Cornwall Police and Crime Panel

Details of meetings of the Police and Crime Panel had been circulated to Members of this Committee to enable them to raise any issues of concern or interest at these Scrutiny meetings.

Members had no queries.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.25 pm

Chair