

## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY

10 November 2015

### Present:

Councillor Emma Morse (Chair)

Councillors Brimble, Bull, George, Hannan, Holland, Packham and Raybould

### Apologies:

Councillors Buswell, Newby, Shiel and Vizard

Councillor Hannaford - Portfolio Holder Housing Revenue Account

### Also Present

Deputy Chief Executive, Assistant Director Environment, Assistant Director Housing, Cleansing & Fleet Manager, Technical Accounting Manager, Principal Accountant Corporate and Democratic Services Officer (Committees) (HB)

### In attendance:

Councillor Owen - Portfolio Holder for Health and Place

Councillor Morris - Portfolio Holder for Customer Access

Councillor Harvey - As Chair of the Homelessness Task and Finish Group

### 48 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2015 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as correct.

### 49 **Declaration of Interests**

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

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

In accordance with Standing Order No. 19, a question in respect of the Public Spaces Protection Order from John Brownbridge was put to the Committee. A copy of the question had been previously circulated to Members. The question, with the reply (in italics), is appended to the minutes. Mr Brownbridge was not present.

### 51 **Questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order 20**

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20, questions in respect of dog bins and a new protocol for not collecting additional black bags left on the lids of overflowing wheeled bins from Councillor Bull were put to the Committee. A copy of the questions had been previously circulated to Members. The questions, with the replies (in italics), are appended to the minutes.

In response to a supplementary question from Councillor Bull, the Portfolio Holder advised that a recent change in the legislation permitted the use of ordinary bins for the disposal of dog waste. To facilitate this, the City Council would first identify the appropriate bins in suitable locations and then appropriately publicise their availability for this purpose.

The Portfolio Holder also provided an update on the recent strengthening of policy on extra domestic waste presented by households. Although less than 1% of bins were overfilled, those that had been left and had been stickered last week had generated about 40 calls a day and became difficult for staff to handle alongside normal demand. The approach was being changed from next week, with a phased approach over a number of weeks, for example, in the first week, Crew 1 would leave any excess bags, putting them in the bins and sticker the bin to encourage the residents to contact the Council to discuss re-cycling and to avoid over-filling their bin in future; the remaining crews would empty overfilled bins but sticker them to alert the resident that this needed to change. Week two would see Crew 2 follow Crew 1's lead and this pattern would then be stepped up across all crews in the following weeks over a four week period or so.

## 52 **Exeter Citizens Advice Bureau**

The Chair welcomed Steve Barriball and Robin Mulholland of CAB. As well as providing statistics relating to welfare benefit, debt, employment and housing, Steve reported:-

- the main causes of a threat of homelessness were around significant life events including relationship breakdown, bereavement, illness and disability and job loss;
- although the cost of living was decreasing this was not always evident from clients;
- a court repossession desk run on each Tuesday in the County Court with almost 90% of actions avoided;
- 30% more people helped in 2015 so far; and
- trends showed a decrease in money and debt problem enquiries but increases in welfare benefits, housing and employment problem enquiries;

### Impact of welfare changes:

- a number of cases where the sanctions policy had caused homelessness;
- the 'bedroom tax' had led to homelessness/threatened homelessness;
- the migration process from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independent Payments and the stringent medicals for PIP and Employment and Support Allowance had caused many cases of financial hardship and an increase in debt and potential/actual homelessness; and
- high number of wrong decisions made by the Department for Work and Pensions with no apparent sanctions.

### Other concerns:

- cost of rented property compared to average wages;
- difficulty in obtaining affordable specialist legal advice;
- the Department for Communities and Local Government estimate that the cost of homelessness per person is £24,000 to £30,000 - a cost borne by local councils, Clinical Commissioning Groups, the Department for Work and Pensions and the criminal justice system; and

- impact of the next round of welfare reforms.

#### Ideas and opportunities

- the Exeter Money Advice Partnership service based in the Civic Centre links debtors to the Council to provide advice and co-location has also made the process one of joint working to achieve sustainable solutions for clients; and
- EMAP funding from Local Welfare Support ends on 31st March 2016 and alternative funding would be required.

He responded as follows to Members' queries:-

- the main financial support to CAB came from the City and County Councils. With increasing financial pressures, other bodies were approached to assist and a significant proportion of income came from charities and consideration was being given to appealing for donations to individuals helped by CAB in the past. Mark Parkinson added that tender documents were being prepared for invites to be issued to Credit Unions to bid for work;
- the demographic of clients was largely that of working age with approximately one third being disabled or with long term ill health. Some 12% were non white British and the majority were female;
- to obtain a better picture of the City's economic well being CAB, in partnership with the City Council, the Chamber of Commerce, the Express and Echo and Exe Radio, had ran a survey of local people with 120 respondents. Approximately a third had seen their income reduce with a third reporting an increase with a similar percentage witnessing no change. A further survey would be undertaken in the new year; and
- the CAB was considering the merits of an ethical letting agency. Details of schemes from elsewhere were available on line. The CAB was involved in lobbying for improved standards in the private rented sector.

The Chair thanked Mr Barriball for the presentation.

### **ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION**

#### **53 Homelessness Task and Finish Group**

Councillor Harvey presented the interim findings of the Homelessness Task and Finish Group in relation to the proposed Strategy and Action Plan.

Responding to queries presented prior to the meeting by a Committee Member, he advised that:-

- the draft Strategy and Action Plan document would address the topic of diversity;
- education and training would be reflected in the Action Plan;
- with respect to the reference made to ex-servicemen and women, the Task and Finish Group recognised that this group required specific support and that the British Legion would be consulted in this respect;
- different packages of assisting the homeless would be incorporated to recognize different needs; and
- he emphasised that the document was an active strategy and would be regularly monitored and updated.

Other issues covered included:-

- the strategy to be in place by 1 April 2016, prior consultation to include both specific consultative events as well as the regular pattern of meetings with established partners in this field. The first draft document would be available by the end of November following consultation and would be reported to this Committee in January;
- joint working with Teignbridge District Council reflected both the cross boundary nature of the problem and the need to maximise use of scarce resources. The nature of the housing problems and the potential solutions were common to both authorities and agencies such as Public Health and the County Council which functioned on a wider Devon basis; and
- some 1,500 homeless people were seen annually, of which less than 5% were rough sleepers and the major proportion of the homelessness budget was spent on temporary accommodation.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the following interim recommendations to this Committee, together with the additions reported above:-

**(a) the proposed structure of the new Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan:-**

- (i) to agree that the Homelessness Strategy should be developed across the Exeter and Teignbridge area to increase opportunities for local residents and reduce administrative burden on the services of developing two separate strategies for a combined service;
- (ii) to agree that the Homelessness Strategy should primarily adopt the four key common themes of:-
  - Health and Protection;
  - Money Matters and Money and Employment;
  - Access to Services; and
  - Accommodation Options and Private Rented Accommodation; and
- (iii) that the Strategy should consider, amongst other responsibilities, how the Council should address homelessness in respect of ex-servicemen and women.

**(b) Proposed Action Plan:-**

- regular review of the Action Plan and review meetings with agencies for the purposes of monitoring the Plan and altering where necessary to reflect any new challenges;
- a cross boundary list of available resources including properties spanning both Exeter and Teignbridge areas should be prepared and circulated;
- access to information on cross boundary areas to be made available by each Authority;
- identifying larger empty properties and working towards bringing these properties back into use in the context of tackling homelessness;
- better signposting when enquiries are received - one information registration form to be used by both Exeter and Teignbridge so

that the individual only has to give details once and they are passed to the relevant Authority for action immediately;

- mapping of services and agencies on an ongoing basis to avoid duplication of work and avoid wasting resources;
- mapping out different pathways to help people with different needs so that they are assisted quickly and effectively;
- staff training with particular emphasis on “soft assessment” skills. For example, specialist training in how best to speak with and to obtain relevant information from ex-servicemen and women generally and to evaluate what type of properties would or would not be suitable;
- monitor the impact of welfare reform on homelessness to allow for schemes to be developed to prevent homelessness or respond quickly when households have been impacted;
- create a credit card size contact information card which can be placed with various agencies (letting agents and hospitals for instance) which individuals can easily keep and refer to; and
- better website information which is easily accessible for individuals in relation to where and how they can access help.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the above interim recommendations and noted that a further report would be submitted to the January meeting of this Committee.

#### 54 **Housing Revenue Account - Budget Monitoring to September 2015**

The report of the Assistant Director Finance was submitted on major differences by management unit to the outturn forecast for the first six months of the financial year up to 30 September 2015.

During this period the total budget variances indicated that there would be a net deficit of £1,783,936 in 2015-16. This represented a decrease of £1,175,246 compared to the revised budgeted deficit of £2,959,182 for 2015-16. It was estimated that the available working balance would stand at £2,952,596 at 31 March 2016. The HRA Capital Programme showed a total forecast spend of £9,241,961 compared to the £10,706,689 approved programme, a decrease of £1,418,728.

The following responses were given to Members’ queries:-

- appropriate re-profiling of the budget would prevent any longer term risk of prejudicing the on-going boiler replacement programme;
- the underspend of £450,000, coupled with £589,612 already reported to Scrutiny Committee - Community in September, from the £2.6 million allocated for damp ingress work had resulted from a cautious estimate, subsequent tenders being lower than expected and drying out of properties negating the need for work to some of these homes;
- the figures presented showed the cumulative effect of a 1% annual rent reduction over the next four years. This would impact on Council own build, planned refurbishments, repairs etc. It would require further management adjustments including improved efficiencies, a reduction in the capital programme etc. Continuation of Council Own Build would then need to be through other means such as the General Fund or a Housing Development Company rather than the HRA. The HRA priority was likely to be focussed on maintaining, as far as possible, investment in existing assets in order to provide good homes; and

- the Government proposals to assess local authority high value properties and to impose levies on Councils on these, on the basis of a national formula, was likely to increase the financial pressure on the HRA.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

## 55 **Community - Budget Monitoring to September 2015**

The report of the Assistant Director Finance was submitted advising 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 approved budget by a total of £25,690 after transfers from reserves and revenue contributions to capital, representing a variation of 0.28% from the revised budget. This included supplementary budgets of £116,500 already approved by Council.

The current capital programme showed a forecast spend of £2,067,700 in 2015/16, compared to the £2,064,350 approved programme, an increase of £3,350.

The following responses were given to Members' queries:-

- the Play Area Refurbishment capital budget was funded by Section 106 monies from developers earmarked for specific sites;
- the 4-5% reduction in re-cycling income from an annual total of around £1.2 million could be attributed to a number of national and international factors affecting processor prices for recyclates, for example a major national paper processor had gone out of business in early 2015, causing a glut in the market and a resultant drop in prices from the remaining UK processor. The City Council was within the top 10% of district authorities for minimising waste, which should be recognised. There were a number of initiatives going on seeking to improve re-cycling such as working with the University and the Guild to improve re-cycling in student households, but the City Council's capacity to carry out large education campaigns was limited by the size of the Re-cycling Team that had been reduced in size over recent years due to budget pressures. Further initiatives that assisted in waste minimisation and increased re-cycling such as described in Min. No. 51 above would help improve the situation. Re-cycling was skewed by the non-collection of food waste which, in any case, could not be re-cycled to generate income. Moreover, disposal by the public at the County Council two re-cycling centres would represent a further 8% to add to the City Council's current 34% rate;
- the final destination of re-cycled computers and other electrical equipment would be clarified;
- work was on-going with the University to address the significant problems caused by students failing to re-cycle, Duryard and Pennsylvania returning the poorest figures in this respect. The Portfolio Holder for Health and Place assured Members that this issue would be a major topic in the forthcoming meetings of the University Task and Finish Group; and
- discussions were being held with City Centre businesses with view to the introduction of an evening refuse collection which could both increase income and improve city centre cleanliness to help benefit the night time economy.

Scrutiny Committee - Community noted the report.

## ITEM FOR EXECUTIVE

### 56 Local Air Quality Action Plan

The Assistant Director Environment presented the report advising Members about the renewal of the Air Quality Strategy and asking the Committee to recommend the adoption of the strategy. The previous Air Quality Strategy had covered the period from 2009 to 2014 and an updated Strategy was therefore required.

It drew together the existing air quality work undertaken by Environmental Health and Licensing at the City Council and work driven by statutory obligations - the strategy providing a means of organising and co-ordinating it to best effect.

He responded as follows to Members' queries:-

- whilst there had been no recent enforcement cases in terms of prosecutions, there was strict regulation and monitoring to ensure compliance;
- the energy from waste incinerator was not a major contributor to poor air quality in the City - traffic pollution being the greatest problem;
- the main means of checking excess emissions from vehicles was the MOT test, although emissions could also be tested at road-side spot checks;
- in terms of the City Council's Fleet, a gradual transition was being made to low emission vehicles on replacement, although this would take slightly longer with regard to larger vehicles such as refuse collection lorries;
- Stagecoach used lower emission buses and Members were advised that issues could be raised with Stagecoach senior management who attended Exeter HATOC meetings, at which any City Councillor could attend;
- other mechanisms, such as congestion charges and work place levies, were being trialled and implemented by some authorities and reference was made to larger scale initiatives in major European cities such as Helsinki for car-less communities. It was mentioned that Cambridge was seeking significant investment of £500 million to constrain traffic/pollution levels to raise at current levels over medium to longer term; and
- the Portfolio Holder for Health and Place referred to a pilot conducted in June and July 2015 under the auspices of the Exeter Health and Wellbeing Board involving three volunteers equipped with personal PM<sub>2.5</sub> monitors and GPS loggers for 24 hours while they conducted their normal work-day commute and activities and the positive change achieved when switching to other modes of transport such as cycling or driving alternative routes that avoided congestion. This project was to be extended in the New Year with Public Health funding.

Members noted the issues raised and suggested that the planning process could offer a further means of combating the growing problems of poor air quality. This could be undertaken either through the planning process for new developments or at a wider strategic level when future City wide transport and planning matters were being brought forward. They asked that this should be highlighted to Executive.

Scrutiny Committee - Community supported the Air Quality Strategy 2015-2020 and asked that Executive be requested to:-

- (1) support, and recommend that Council formally adopt, the Air Quality Strategy 2015-2020; and

- (2) consider further the significant impact of air pollution on public health, and that greater weight is given to the matter of air quality and lower emissions when developing strategic and infrastructure planning policy and when carrying out development control.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.15 pm

Chair