

PUBLIC Questions for Corporate Scrutiny Committee – 24 January 2019

<p>Peter Cleasby It is clear from the discussions in Scrutiny Committees on the draft budget for next year that councillors (and members of the public) are having difficulty in working out what the consequences of changes to budget lines are for actual services. For example, at Place Scrutiny Committee on 17 January budget lines 81B&C showed a saving of £540,450 but officers explained that this was a “paper saving” with budgets distributed to other services.</p> <p>In the interests of transparency to which the Council claims it is committed, will this Scrutiny Committee instruct, or ask the Executive to instruct, officers to produce budget papers with a commentary in terms that councillors and the public can easily understand showing which services are being reduced and which increased, rather than relying on descriptions of movements to obscurely described individual budget lines?</p>	<p><u>Response made by Councillor Edwards, Leader & Portfolio Holder for Growth & City Development</u></p> <p>Exeter City Council was committed to being transparent. He had requested the Chief Finance Officer to revise an element of the Estimates sheet, which would set out the movements for each management unit, separating out the amounts that did not impact on the overall Council Taxpayer.</p> <p>The information would be added as an appendix to the General Fund, HRA Estimates and Capital Programme 2019/20 report, which would be considered at the Executive meeting on 12 February and subsequently included within the budget book.</p> <p>The Chief Finance Officer responded to a Member’s request for clarification stating that the request, as stated in the Leader’s response would be actioned with the information added to the main financial report to the next Executive.</p> <p>Mr Cleasby thanked the Leader for his response and for consideration and action of his request, which he felt would ensure that Members were fully informed.</p>
<p>Peter Cleasby The quarterly statements of Council spending include payments where the recipient’s identity has been redacted, in line with the Council’s policy on redactions. During 2017 and 2018 fees of just over £152,000 in total were paid to suppliers of consultancy services whose identities</p>	<p><u>Response made by Councillor Edwards, Leader & Portfolio Holder for Growth & City Development</u></p> <p>The redacted information related to individuals such as landlords, consultants or recipients of council tax refunds and details of their names would be classed personal data.</p>

were redacted as Personal Data, not as Commercial Confidentiality, so redaction justification on the grounds of commercial confidentiality is not involved.

Most of these 69 payments were for services relating to marketing and communications, arts events and venues, and the Museum, and the frequency of redactions has increased significantly since late 2017. The Council's policy on redaction states: "where it is in the public interest to name an individual (e.g. information regarding sole traders and individuals in the public domain) the information will be disclosed unless the individual has specifically objected to its publication".

Will the Council please provide examples of the reasoning that led officers to conclude that these consultancy payments should be anonymised, and explain how it is in the public interest that the identity of the recipients of the £152,000 of public funds should be kept secret?

Publishing this information on the council's website was, in effect, publishing the information to the world at large and presented an element of risk. For example, an individual may not want information about their personal income made public or they may not want anyone to know that they are working in and around Exeter. In order to comply with the Council's data protection responsibilities, the names have been redacted.

Although every effort is made to give those individuals receiving a payment the opportunity to object to their details being published, we cannot be certain that everyone has received the notification. He noted the point that the public had a right to know how public funds were spent and this is why the amount and description would be included on the spreadsheet.

The Chief Finance Officer responded to a Member's request for clarification over the publication of such information and whether it was in respect of data protection or if there was another conflict of interest. He added that every effort was made to publish as much information as possible and certainly in relation to the disciplines of expenditure, but it was necessary to redact the name of individuals or payees. He advised that the Council's procurement process included both an internal and external audit check, as part of the necessary value for money audit detail. He would discuss this with the Procurement Team, and it was certainly in no one's interest to publish information on transactions relating to individuals.

Mr Cleasby thanked the Leader for his response. He wished to reiterate that he had no interest in seeking unnecessary information and had only sought specific information about the level of spending in relation to consultancy fees. He felt it was in the public interest to ensure that there was information on this matter. He also thanked the City Solicitor and Head of HR for offering a view in respect of the Council's current redaction policy. He clarified his comment 'disclosure of the information unless the individual has objected to its publication' and enquired would the information be shared with the public or just for Members. The City Solicitor & Head of HR agreed to discuss this matter with the Data Protection Officer and update Members and respond to Mr Cleasby.

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