

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16 July 2020

Present:

Councillor Matthew Vizard (Chair)

Councillors Mitchell, M, Foggin, Mrs Henson, Mitchell, K, Oliver, Pattison, Martin, Quance, Sheldon, Sparkes, Wardle and Warwick

Apologies:

Councillor Begley

Also present:

Director (DB), Director (JY), Democratic Services Officer (MD) and Democratic Services Officer (MD)

In attendance:

Councillor Amal Ghusain - Portfolio Holder for Equalities, Diversities and Communities

Councillor David Harvey - Portfolio Holder for Environment and City Management

Councillor Diana Moore

17 **Apologies**

This was received from Councillor Begley.

18 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 25 June 2020 were taken as read, approved as correct, for signing by the Chair at the earliest possible convenience.

19 **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

20 **Questions from the Public Under Standing Order No 19**

No questions from Members of the public were received.

21 **Presentation on Covid-19 by Portfolio Holders and Questions from Members and Answers**

The Chair invited the two Portfolio Holders to present their respective briefing notes.

Questions from Members submitted in advance of the meeting with the answers given at the meeting together with the supplementary questions and answers made at the meeting are set out below for each Portfolio.

Portfolio Holder for Environment and City Management - Councillor Harvey - in presenting his briefing note highlighted the following:-

- The Parks and Opens Spaces team had continued business as usual with a number re-trained in case of a rise in sickness levels. Additional staff were trained as excavator operatives to keep the burial service running and green space operatives were trained as refuse loaders.
- Advantage had been taken of the quiet period to undertake deep cleaning of the City Centre and to complete maintenance and repair of our play parks; and
- With an ease of the Lockdown restrictions, toilets and car parks had re-opened with social distancing measures and enhanced cleaning regimes applications for new garden waste collections were being processed again.

Questions from Members of the Committee

- 1 **Councillor Oliver** - *To follow Government safety guidelines, what work needs to be done so playparks can re-open safely?*

All of our 75 play parks need a detailed Covid-19 risk assessment. The risk assessment will highlight what frequent cleansing regime is appropriate for the equipment. Additional resources including staff and chemicals have been identified to complete the cleansing regime. Appropriate signs which comply with the guidance also need to be designed, manufactured and erected. Progress is going well, the risk assessments have been completed, resources identified and signs ordered. We are currently waiting for a delivery and installation date and then all the measures will be in place to open our play parks safely. It is hoped that all play parks will re-open by 24 July 2020.

Supplementary question and answer.

With Valley Parks once more accessible and of such value to the elderly can more park benches be provided?

Other than the potential for identifying external funding sources, the City Council itself, because of the huge financial pressure it is under as identified in the Emergency Budget, will not have the resources at this point to provide additional benches.

- 2 **Councillor K. Mitchell** – *Can the Portfolio Holder confirm the plans for the introduction of a doorstep food and glass collection service have not been affected by the pandemic and when are they scheduled to be introduced?*

The effect of Covid-19 on the proposed changes to our waste and recycling collection is currently being assessed by officers. There are a range of companies which are critical to the introduction of the new service and all have been impacted by the epidemic in different ways but the extent of the impact on these companies is unknown at present.

Supplementary question and answer.

Can an assurance be given that a report will be brought back to update Members on the collection service at the earliest opportunity?

Yes.

- 3 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - *Does the Council intend to alter any element of its current charging regime regarding car parking prior to any normal review?*

The annual parking tariff proposals were agreed by Executive in February. However, the implementation process has been put on hold due to the initial Covid-19 lock-down period and subsequent economic recovery stage. Income and usage figures are being analysed on a weekly basis against the revised emergency budget expectations (that only 50% of expected parking income will be achieved during 2020/21) to gauge when/if the outstanding proposals will be actioned. Because of Covid-19 it has not been possible to implement the legal requirement to consult.

Link to Committee Report (Item 35):- <http://s-civ-wap10.civic.local:9071/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=112&MId=6199>

Supplementary question and answer.

Is it the intention to review car park sites for re-purposing given the economic downturn?

This Scrutiny Committee is not in a position to review this matter.

- 4 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - *Does the Council have any plans to encourage a greater uptake of its excellent Homecall service prior to any possible second wave of the virus infection or a flu epidemic this autumn?*

The small advertising budget available for Homecall has been spent as usual. Feedback from new customers suggests that the majority of them selected us as a provider due to 'word of mouth' recommendation from existing clients. The telecare industry is now a crowded market place and our chief advantages are being a trusted brand with local knowledge.

Supplementary question and answer

Is there a target within the business plan to increase this service by the Autumn?

No.

- 5 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - *Within what timescale does the Council envisage it will complete the production of a Business Recovery Plan for its commercial tenants?*

The Council will not be producing a Business Recovery Plan for its commercial tenants, that's not our role. Each commercial business will, if necessary, produce their own business recovery plan for their own individual business and circumstances. In Section 2 of the Portfolio Holder report - 'Recovery Phase' - the report mentions that activities for Environment and City Management staff during this phase include 'continuing to liaise with our business tenants to help them with their recovery plans'. As discussed in Section 1.11 of the report this may include discussions on rent deferrals or consideration of measures such as pavement licences for the hospitality sector which would enable trading with adequate social distancing.

Questions from another Council Member.

1 **Councillor D. Moore** – *Is the Exeter Business Support Recovery Group:-*

1. *working with the Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and the BID; and*

2. *how is this group engaging small business, including social enterprises and hospitality businesses?*

Yes, the group has representatives from Exeter Chamber (it is chaired by the Chair of the Exeter Chamber, Matt Roach, Exeter International Airport) and FSB, and is linked to the BID through the City Centre Recovery Group. The group is engaging small businesses through all of the business representatives that are taking an active role in the group, also through the range of partners that have existing relationships with small businesses through their work – such as Exeter College. The Social Enterprise sector is championed through Fiona Carden of Co-Lab who is part of the group. We are specifically supporting hospitality businesses by working collaboratively with the Visit Exeter team – sharing the appropriate guidance in relation to re-opening, and using them as a conduit for the range of business support measures in place – such as the Discretionary Grant Scheme.

Supplementary question and answer.

Will the needs of the self-employed and micro-businesses also be addressed within the Recovery Plan?

This will be passed on to the team working on the Recovery Plan.

Portfolio Holder for Equalities, Diversities and Communities – Councillor Ghusain – in presented her briefing note highlighted the following:-

- in addition to its normal statutory work, the Environmental Health and Community Safety Team was required to respond to the Covid-19 crisis by advising businesses and the wider community on how to adapt and respect the new requirements brought about by the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020. This was particularly complex given the rapidly changing regulatory environment;
- the Council was in a strong position to respond to the crisis through the long term investment in Wellbeing Exeter and its approach to community development through its Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) policy established in 2019. It had reviewed and introduced a new community grant fund which was adapted for the purposes of responding to Covid-19. All are predicated on supporting and facilitating communities to come together to help themselves; and
- the four main strands of support to communities provided were through:-
 - Wellbeing Exeter and Exeter Community Wellbeing;
 - Exeter Connect;
 - Citizens Advice Exeter; and
 - The Covid-19 Community Grants Fund.

Questions from Members of the Committee

- 1 **Councillor Oliver** - *At the beginning of Lockdown, Exeter individuals and groups rallied round to collect and deliver essential food and medication for people shielding or self-isolating, now we hear of more and more people having to claim universal credit with a five week wait for regular payments. How have needs changed over the last months and how is Exeter City Council managing these needs?*

The City Council has responded by working very closely with Wellbeing Exeter partners to listen carefully to Community Builders and others about the type of information and support that is needed to encourage neighbourhood action at a hyper local level. This is how Exeter Community Wellbeing came about and evolved over time. Daily conversations took place across the network with officers listening to the issues from grass roots groups and individuals and then putting in place advice, guidance or communications in direct response to the needs identified.

The Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach that underpins Wellbeing Exeter requires the Council to tread a very fine line in ensuring that our role is supportive and responsive and not in any way controlling or dictatorial. I am very proud of the work that officers and partners have done, and continue to do in this respect.

Officers also worked closely with Devon County Council to ensure that the right help and support was available to individuals on the NHS Shielded list. This was a very fast paced project and not always a smooth process. Officers right across the Council worked tirelessly to ensure that help and support got to where it was needed which, as set out in the report, included setting up and staffing an emergency food distribution centre at the Matford Centre and organising the delivery of essential supplies to those in greatest need.

Supplementary questions and answers.

How will the Council respond to the Government's re-introduction of sanctions for those unable to continue to meet benefit payments?

Working with Devon County Council and its partner agencies, the Council is committed to maintaining its support to the most vulnerable in society. Work through the Exeter Community Wellbeing hub has helped identify many who require continued support and, consequently, letters have been sent to over a 1,000 individuals to advise them of the opportunity for continued assistance. In addition, Customer First staff are constantly alert to the needs of those who present themselves for support and are able to refer on to the appropriate support agency/department. This work is now core to their role.

How much longer will support for the Shielded continue especially as many of the volunteers will be returning to their jobs?

Government support for the shielded ends on 31 July 2020 but many areas of work will continue such as the availability of food parcels. In addition to the staff who continue to work in the Customer Contact Centre and the training of other staff whilst delivering the Exeter Community Wellbeing hub the overall capacity of the Council to respond in a holistic way to people with a variety of needs, including the most vulnerable in society, has been widened. The Exeter Community Wellbeing hotline continues through the Customer Contact

Centre and all calls are tracked and analysed to identify any trends where additional support can be focussed. The Exeter Community Wellbeing hub functioned effectively because of the valuable support from community and volunteer groups, and this network remains should a resurgence of the pandemic occurs. One example of new ways of working was the ability of Council staff to refer individuals direct to the Wellbeing Exeter Community Connectors, whereas previously, this could only be done through GP's.

- 2 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - *The report states a 163% increase in private sector housing work. Can the Portfolio Holder outline the reasons for this increase and the actions taken by the Council to resolve these concerns?*

Technically Private Sector Housing is under the Supporting People Portfolio held by Cllr Morse however I can respond:

There are three main changes:

1. Improvements in working practices that have increased productivity, e.g. we now systematically assess large blocks of self-contained flats rather than take each flat as an individual unit as we did in the past.
2. More proactive work with private landlords, agents and tenants resulting in an increase in enquiries from landlords acting proactively to improve property conditions; and in some cases, contacting us for advice following complaints from their tenants.
3. Covid-19 impact: more people spending more time at home as a result of lockdown has resulted in tenants becoming more aware of issues resulting in an increase in complaints.

Due to the new working practices the service is dealing with this increase in demand and complaints are being investigated and action taken, where appropriate to resolve them.

- 3 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - *The report states a 194% increase in Neighbourhood complaints, mainly noise complaints. Can the Portfolio Holder outline the reasons for the increase in complaints and the actions taken by the Council to resolve these issues?*

We think the increase is directly linked to lockdown with people spending more time in close contact with neighbours. This increases awareness of others; may heighten intolerance and may exacerbate behaviours in such a way that they become annoying to others e.g. playing music for longer periods of time.

All complaints are being investigated in line with existing policy and the increase in demand is being met by staff being drawn in from other areas of the service. However, there is no corresponding increase in enforcement activity following these investigations, which suggests that many of the complaints do not pass the threshold of being a statutory nuisance.

Supplementary question and answer.

Were complaints evenly spread across the city or were hotspots evident?

Although there were three or four hotspots identified initially, over the whole period the level of complaints is balanced across all wards in the city.

- 4 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - *Can the Portfolio Holder outline when the Council will revert back to the old grants system i.e. ward grants and explain how it will function?*

Ward grants that were suspended because of the emergency fund at the outset of the outbreak have now been reviewed and some, where it was relevant to do so in a Covid-19 context have now been processed. The Covid-19 grants programme is being reviewed again at the end of July. When the Councillor Ward grants programme re-opens it will function using the digital process set up in 2019 so it will function in exactly the same way as before Covid-19.

Supplementary question and answer.

Are security checks undertaken in respect of grant claims and is there a list available of those supported?

All applications are rigorously examined against set criteria and grant recipients must report back as a condition of the grant. There have been 74 grants made in the last four months from a total of 97 applications. Regular briefings, including a listing of the grants made, are sent to Members and details are also to be placed on the Council website.

- 5 **Councillor K. Mitchell** - *Can the Portfolio Holder give more details on the Council's track and trace service?*

This is an internal, digital process set up so that the Strategic Management Board can keep track of staff presenting with Covid-19 symptoms to ensure that any potential early signs of an Exeter City Council workplace outbreak are identified at the earliest opportunity and remedial action is taken to limit the impact on staff, customers and the wider community.

Supplementary question and answer.

How would the Council respond in respect of the long term health implications of any individual who contracted Covid-19?

The response will be the same as that already in existence for staff through established policies. The health and wellbeing of staff is a major priority and staff are fully consulted on the necessary precautions arising from this crisis within current practices and policies, with track and trace a part of this process. During the pandemic staff sickness levels have been the lowest level ever recorded and continue to be monitored on a daily basis.

- 6 **Councillor M. Mitchell** - *Can Members be provided with a report of the activities of Citizens Advice since the lockdown in March 2020 and can any data also be produced on a ward basis and circulated to ward members*

Yes - these reports that relate to the Council contract are already available on the Council website. The contract requires quarterly reports so those we currently have on the website are for Quarter 1: January to March 2020. Quarter 2 reports are due shortly and will be published on the website as soon as we receive it. Further information about the wider activity on Citizens Advice should be sought directly from them.

Supplementary question and answer.

Is localised data and information available from any other non-statutory body to help deal with the Covid-19 pandemic?

There is a vast array of data available from a multitude of bodies which we review when necessary.

Questions from other Council Members.

1 **Councillor D. Moore**
Environmental Health and Community 3. Health and Safety Licensing

For the following areas with of illegal levels of air pollution:

Alphington Street, Cowick Street (outbound), Livery Dole, Rowancroft, Fore Street Heavitree inbound and East Wonford Hill), Salutory Mount and Honiton Road),

and areas of concern near the illegal level:

Cowick Street / Cowick Lane junction, Red Cow Village, York Road, the junction of Blackboy Road and Pinhoe Road, Barrack Road at Livery Dole, Sidmouth Road and Topsham Road near Tollards Road.

please can the Portfolio Holder:

1. *Provide the initial data readings for the sites for Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) readings, during April, May and June this year.*

The nitrogen dioxide diffusion tube data set is not released until the complete data set for the year has been validated, adjusted and presented in a form which can be compared to the objective level. This is the responsibility of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). There are 71 stations across the city.

2. *During April - June this year did any monitoring site, in any location in the city, breach legal levels of air pollution?*

There are two objectives for nitrogen dioxide. One is an annual average of below 40 micrograms per cubic metre. Because this is an average level for a whole year it is not possible to say whether or not it is exceeded for any individual month until the whole year's data has been validated.

The other objective is for the hourly average, which should not be above 200 micrograms per cubic metre on more than 18 occasions during the year.

Again, it is not possible to identify compliance with this until the whole year is complete.

3. *Publish the PM 10 and PM 2.5 readings for the sites where these are measured, for April to June this year?*

The PM10 and PM2.5 data set has not been ratified and is not available for publication at this time. However, we can report that the continuous analyser at RAMM has not measured any concentrations of over 200 micrograms per cubic metre during the whole of 2020 to date. This site is our only automatic air quality monitoring station directly providing (unratified) data to the Automatic Urban and Rural Network

Supplementary question and answer.

Due to the interest in the air pollution during the Lockdown, what immediate and specific actions can be taken by the City Council over the next month or two to ensure Devon County Council acts to reduce traffic as a major source of air pollution?

Significant strategic and operational work continues with input into a number of fora although, ultimately, transport is a County Council responsibility. A number of authorities are similarly frustrated at the long time periods for Defra to release its data and the City Council seeks to widely share this information when available.

- 2 **Councillor D. Moore** - *Community Grants and Community Development. The mutual aid groups across the city are putting together a report of their experiences providing emergency community support. How will the Council take on board this learning and work with mutual aid groups and other community and voluntary organisations on the ground to inform, develop and publish community emergency plan(s) so that communities can be prepared for any second COVID-19 wave, any flu outbreaks and the impact of Brexit over the winter.*

I will be delighted to receive the feedback report and I will ensure that officers feed this into our city-wide Wellbeing Exeter programme which has proved itself as a vital network for enabling community resilience. I will also ensure that officers share this report with Exeter Connect, the new Voluntary and Community sector infrastructure support service commissioned by the Council. I am sure this will be very helpful report that can inform how these programmes and services develop going forward.

Given the City Council's ABCD approach to community development it is not the intention to produce emergency plans at an area level. Lessons will be learned from other parts of the country on their response to recent spikes in the Covid-19 rates as well as the Council's response to the outbreak to date through Exeter Community Wellbeing.

Supplementary question and answer.

The Devon Community Resilience Forum holds two forum events per year with a focus on community emergency planning and there is therefore an opportunity for a Council top down meeting community bottom up to develop local emergency plans. It would be helpful therefore, if the City Council published its Emergency Plan and worked with support groups and community groups locally to consider how they might develop community plans, particularly as much of the recent response was organised on a local or mainly ward basis with these bodies thinking about what happened and how to respond better next time. It would not be the Council introducing a top down approach to community planning.

Strong and adaptable networks are already in existence as evidenced by the resilient and co-operative approach of local communities to the crisis with support from the City Council through its ABCD approach to community development. Because of the approach which has seen a long term investment in Wellbeing Exeter, the Council was in a better position to respond to the crisis than some other authorities.

There is much evidence to indicate that this approach is effective and the Council continues to engage and collaborate rather than seeking a more prescriptive relationship with communities.

The Chair, Portfolio Holders and Committee Members asked that their thanks be passed on to staff for their commitment, hard work and significant efforts during the current crisis.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.11 pm

Chair

DRAFT