

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

03 December 2020

Cllr Amal Ghusain – Update on Portfolio Holder Priorities

Exeter Community Wellbeing

Exeter Community Wellbeing (01392 265000 / www.exeter.gov.uk/wellbeing)

Exeter City Council, Wellbeing Exeter have been working together to provide practical help and support for local people to get through the coronavirus pandemic. We set up **Exeter Community Wellbeing** to assist individuals and community groups to help and support each other at this challenging time. The community hotline is embedded within our ECC Customer Service Centre with several dedicated staff responding to calls, online requests and making outbound calls to vulnerable residents.

The hotline and online forms for residents to request support have been in operation since March and we have made over 2,850 connections through the platform with thousands more at neighbourhood level. The learning from the first lockdown, relationships with local organisations and an established system has been vital in providing an instant response during lockdown 2. Whilst demand was relatively low over the summer, an increase was experienced prior to Lockdown#2 in October. As such the programme was fully re-established and in operation for the first day of the second lockdown on 2nd November 2020.

During lockdown 2 there have been approximately 15 calls each day from residents needing support, with several spikes occurring in line with national and local communication.

Whilst many of the connections during the first lockdown were focussed at practical support such as food deliveries, prescription pick-ups and connections to local groups, the main theme for help and advice during lockdown 2 is for individuals and families in financial hardship. Residents are being supported to apply for the Wellbeing Support Fund, access to local free food resources and signposted to local services such as Citizens Advice

With support from Exeter Connect, a network of 7 local neighbourhood groups are supporting with local volunteer help and ECFC City Community Trust are providing emergency delivery response for food & prescriptions and wellbeing check-in calls. Insight from local community offers and themes of the support required is surfacing through Exeter Connect and our team of Community Builders through Wellbeing Exeter.

Clinically Extremely Vulnerable – CEV

Working in partnership with Devon County Council and district authorities across Devon we are providing direct support to those residents classified as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV), these are people who were 'shielding' during the first Lockdown.

A national letter & email providing government information and advice to CEVs was delivered to residents in England on 4-6th November, with Devon County Council sending a further communication to 35,000 CEVs in the county during w/c 9th November. This provided details of local district hotlines and further local support. There are over 3500 CEVs in Exeter.

Approximately 50% of the hotline demand is from CEVs per day, with 5-10 residents contacting ECC for support. Urgent delivery support is being provided by ECFC, wellbeing support through Wellbeing Exeter, connections to local neighbourhood groups and financial support through the Wellbeing Support Fund for individual CEVs and their families in financial hardship. Aldi food vouchers have been sourced and provided to those residents needing an urgent food delivery.

We are now receiving a daily data feed of CEV residents requesting support via national hotline. A daily outbound call list is completed by Customer Services team with 56 residents being directly supported so far. Many have appreciated there is local support on hand should situations change over the winter and practical support be required.

A funding allocation from Government via DCC of £27,295 has been agreed for current lockdown CEV support for Exeter, with resources being utilised to:

- Cover additional staffing costs and overtime required to service the hotline
- Provide direct communication to CEVs and vulnerable groups regarding the Exeter Community Wellbeing Offer
- Support wider citywide comms e.g. radio & visual signage
- Provide small seed funding grants to local mutual aid support groups to enable them to stand up their operations

A £2000 grant distributed to Exeter Connect for immediate local neighbourhood group support, to enable these groups to provide immediate support to their local volunteers and residents. Groups can access up to £250 for standing up their local support offer.

Access to Food

A public community food information resource has been developed for Exeter Community Wellbeing, its partners and the wider community. This contains information on:

- Local free food sources
- Local commercial food sources and delivery options
- National Supermarket delivery sources and priority food slots for vulnerable people

There is also a food information resource directly related to free food for street homeless. These are available via www.exeter.gov.uk/weelbeing and have been circulated amongst local networks and community groups.

There has been an incredible local community response to supporting people with food, with 8 local organisations providing a free food and local delivery offer to those residents in most need of support.

Devon County Council are coordinating the response to the Winter COVID fund, providing support for children on free school meals during Christmas and Half Term. A voucher system for supermarkets and local food networks is being explored to provide meals during school holidays. There are approximately 1200 young people registered for free school meals in Exeter.

Digital Inclusion – vulnerable families

An initiative has developed through the Education Strand of the City Recovery Plan to provide families on low incomes with digital devices to support children isolating with their learning.

We are providing immediate funding of £10k from existing discretionary funds related to COVID-19. Exeter City Council received a grant of £28,000 from the Alcoa Howmet Global

Foundation and funding from Devon County Council to support vulnerable families during COVID-19.

The project is being led by the Ted Wragg Trust on behalf of local education partners and will build a bank of devices to be used across the network of Exeter primary schools for families in financial hardship. A quote from Rachel Shaw, CEO of the Exeter Learning Academy Trust:

“Thank you so much for your efforts with this. I had the pleasure of popping into a school leaders meeting this afternoon and telling them the good news and they were delighted that the City was working in this way to support their families. It’s not only showing our families how much the City cares but also giving our school leaders a real boost at time when they most need it.”

A progress update on the impact of this initiative will be provided at the next Scrutiny

Financial Support

The Council has two key funds to support wellbeing of communities and residents during COVID-19

For organisations and groups:

COVID Community Grants since March 2020:

- o We have received a total 121 applications
- o Awarded 85 applications totalling - £115,168.95

For individuals in severe financial hardship:

COVID Wellbeing Support Fund since June 2020:

- o £174,850 received from Govt via DCC, eligible for spend to September 2021
- o Awarded £52,981 to 233 residents (emergency food, white goods, emergency fuel, transport to medical appointments)

Communications

Weekly briefing notes are being compiled and circulated internally to all staff and members. A weekly themed press release is being circulated through communication networks, partners and social media. The Exeter Coronavirus Facebook pages are in operation with 7100 followers, daily updates and interactions being provided.

The weekly Exeter Community Wellbeing blog is relaunched providing key information, advice & guidance and to share stories and local impact of community response to Lockdown#2

Exeter Connect

Exeter Community Initiatives were awarded the contract to run the new Voluntary Sector Support Service for Exeter in December 2019. The service is now called ‘Exeter Connect’

Staffing update

Exeter Connect has Service Manager role in place since April this year (job share). Two Development Workers (21 hours each) have recently joined the team, both are very experienced in community development. There is also a full-time administrator. There is still the scope to recruit one more full-time Development Worker, although recruitment is on hold due to lockdown.

Website launch

The Exeter Connect website was launched at the end of September. The resources section of the website will be updated regularly. Communities officers from the council are liaise closely with the Exeter Connect team on information, advice and guidance that would be useful resources for community groups and organisations.

Lockdown support for local groups

Exeter Connect have a weekly check in by email throughout lockdown with all the Local Area Teams to keep up to date with progress and offering support.

The connections and support networks which were formed previously appear to have been maintained with 7 local groups formally providing an offer of local support with key contact information.

Funding has been provided for Exeter Connect to respond (as highlighted above). One example is the request for a phone as a central point of contact. E.g. Pennsylvania needed a smart phone to enable WhatsApp conversations.

Some areas i.e Countess Wear & Topsham have expressed concern over their low volunteer numbers. Groups have been advised that others areas do have a surplus of volunteers if required.

VCSE Sector Survey

The survey is now live, and closes on 25th November.

Aims:

- To build a clearer picture of the state of the sector currently
- To find out what support needs there are in the sector
- To work out the best approach to help groups stay afloat moving forward

There have been 42 responses so far, with 21 of respondents asking for more support. A report will be compiled from responses form groups in the city by mid-December.

Citizen Advice Exeter

Citizen Advice Exeter were appointed by the Council in October 2019 to provide a city wide Independent Information Advice and Advocacy Service. The purpose of the service is to:

- Ensure free, independent, confidential and impartial advice, information and advocacy is available to help people resolve the problems they face.
- Help address the widening inequality gap for Exeter communities in terms of health, income, employment and access to services
- Work alongside the Council's Housing Needs Team to support customers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and are experiencing financial and budgeting difficulties

Citizens Advice Exeter continues to assist the wider community of Exeter, and those specifically affected by Coronavirus.

The latest statistics (below) show the increasing demand for advice, as the financial impact of Coronavirus has started to build in the last quarter. With the recent announcement of the extension of the furlough scheme until 31st March 2021, and extensions to payment holiday arrangements for mortgages and consumer credit, this is likely to give some breathing space to those facing income reductions and/or job losses in

the short term. However, any relief is only likely to be temporary without further Government support for those with housing arrears and placing uplifts to Universal Credit and other welfare benefits on a permanent basis.

	01/04/2020 – 30/06/2020	01/07/2020 – 30/09/2020	% Change
Clients	1797	1970	+9.6%
Benefit enquiries	1993	2731	+37.0%
Debt enquiries	463	658	+42.1%
Housing enquiries	177	241	+36.1%

In relation to employment enquires, we had 593 enquiries last year in the 6-month period 1st April 2019 – 30th September 2019, compared to 709 enquiries in the same period in 2020; an overall increase of 19.5%. The Citizens Advice Exeter report – We Can Work it Out – see: <https://www.citizensadviceexeter.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/We-Can-Work-it-Out-FINAL.pdf> highlights the challenges faced by employees and employers alike in the first three months of the furlough scheme.

Citizens Advice Exeter has been able to secure some short-term additional funding to help to support an increase in demand for its services, but is looking for longer-term funding to support its work as the impact of Coronavirus on people's finances, housing and employment situations is likely to last long past the medical emergency.

Ward profiles of the data are available on the Citizen Advice Exeter website.

The contract includes a requirement for the CAB Court team to identify clients who are at risk of homelessness and refer them to the Council to offer support to prevent this. Referral systems are being reviewed due to COVID restrictions. Citizen Advice have taken part in the Exeter Community Wellbeing partnership response to COVID. It has been really valuable to have a close working relationship, so that call handlers can make quick referrals for people who could benefit from financial help and support.

COVID-19 Community Grants Fund

The Exeter COVID-19 Community Action Fund was set up at the outset of the COVID pandemic to help community groups and organisations as they step up to help those people most affected by the pandemic. The fund is supported by Exeter City Council and a generous £100,000 contribution from the Exeter Chiefs Foundation.

The Fund is still open to support groups and organisations with a one-off grant of up to £1,000 to support projects for community led activities that will:

- meet urgent needs within the community
- cover transport costs for getting vital supplies to people isolated at home
- help people to stay connected and informed
- help people maintain and support mental health and wellbeing

COVID Community Grants since March 2020:

We have received a total 121 applications

We have awarded 85 applications totalling - £115,168.95

We plan to review the criteria for this grant over the next month depending on the demand from this second lockdown.

Ward grants have been available since the start of October and are progressing well. The main request for funding is through ward grants.

