

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1 July 2021

Present:

Councillor Matthew Vizard (Chair)
Councillors Mitchell, M, Allcock, Atkinson, Denning, Mrs Henson, Pearce, Sparkes, Sparling, Wardle and Warwick

Apologies:

Councillors Martin, A and Quance

Also present:

Deputy Chief Executive, Corporate Manager Democratic and Civic Support, Democratic Services Officer (HB) and Democratic Services Officer (SLS)

In attendance:

Councillor David Harvey	-	Portfolio Holder for City Management
Councillor Amal Ghusain	-	Portfolio Holder for Communities and Culture
Councillor Ruth Williams	-	Portfolio Holder for Supporting People
Councillor Laura Wright	-	Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development and Services

13 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 1 April 2021 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

14 **Councillor Alys Martin**

Councillor Martin had submitted her apologies due to her need to meet Government requirements to self-isolate in respect of Covid-19.

15 **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

16 **Questions from the public under Standing Order 19**

No questions from members of the public were received.

17 **Questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order 20**

In accordance with Standing Order No 20 the following questions, which had been circulated in advance to Members of the Committee, had been submitted by Councillors Atkinson, M. Mitchell and Sparling.

Questions from Committee Members

Councillor M. Mitchell

Can the Portfolio Holder provide an update regarding the council house building programme for the next five years and clarify whether the targets are realistic?

Response

Members will be aware that an ambitious Council house building target was set and agreed last year of 500 homes over a ten year period - a target which balanced the Council's ambition of increased supply with that of retrofitting and maintaining our existing properties.

I am pleased to report that substantial progress has already been made with our Council Development Programme and I can confirm that;

75 properties have either been completed and occupied or will be completed within the next three months

92 properties have Planning Approval and are at the Tender stage of development - with development work anticipated to commence later this year/early 2022

22 properties have had detailed feasibility work completed and will be progressing to Planning later this year A potential sites list which could yield 239 properties over nine locations is being subjected to a detailed development appraisal with our development partner Exeter City Living - we anticipate a detailed development programme resulting from this.

As such, I am able to confirm that 428 properties and potential sites currently form our development plan and demonstrates excellent progress in year two of our 10 year target.

Supplementary question and answer.

What more can be done to build more houses?

The Council is doing a great deal already in uncertain times caused by Brexit and the Covid-19 Pandemic. Future house building by the Council will continue to be considered with due regard to feasibility.

Councillor Atkinson

A new Exeter City Community Trust Initiative plans to offer >100 supported accommodation places across several wards, including Alphington, to partners including Exeter City Council. Myself and Ben Bradshaw M.P. have been made aware of some issues for vulnerable current residents who are to be evicted to make way for the new scheme.

What housing advice is given to single men and women on a low income with a history of vulnerabilities when they are threatened with eviction? Is available accommodation affordable?

If there is a gap between provision and housing such that it could lead to homelessness and hardship, as a city how can we work with private sector and social landlords and other agencies and housing advice services to improve the situation in the short to immediate term?

In particular, what lessons can the City Council learn from housing schemes like the Exeter Community Trust initiative?

Councillor Williams, the Portfolio Holder for Supporting People, gave the following response:-

What housing advice is given to single men and women on a low income with a history of vulnerabilities when they are threatened with eviction?

Anyone threatened with eviction will be offered either an appointment with a Casework Officer or will be passed to an Officer to deal with that day, if their situation is urgent.

The Casework Officer will then make an assessment in accordance with housing legislation, to see if they are threatened with homelessness. Sometimes landlords threaten eviction and where these are not lawful the Officer will then work with the Landlord to try and avoid eviction if possible.

Depending on timescales, a prevention or relief duty is likely to be taken. The Casework Officer will work through a Personal Housing Plan to help the client either stay in their home if possible and reasonable to do so, or to help them find a new home before they are homeless if this is possible.

The Casework Officer will make an assessment of any vulnerabilities and signpost to additional services if needed. If a client has debt issues then they could be referred to Homemaker or the Citizens Advice Bureau. If a client has mental health difficulties they may be supported to get additional help from their GP. If a client is homeless then the Casework Officer will assess to see if there is a legal duty to provide emergency temporary accommodation. The Officer will see if there is reason to believe the client has a priority need. Not all vulnerabilities are classed as a priority need and the Casework Officer may need to make enquiries to find out more information.

If a client does have a priority need then temporary accommodation will be offered and the Casework Officer will work on a Pathway plan so that the client finds permanent accommodation as quickly as possible.

Is available accommodation in Exeter affordable?

As in many other parts of the country, the cost of accommodation is high due to basic demand and supply issues. Exeter, as a reasonably affluent city, has significant housing capacity pressures one of which is affordability given local market property prices and rents. Added competition for private rented housing from professionals and the student market seeking city centre accommodation adds to the supply issues and therefore affordability.

Anyone living in Exeter who is entitled to means tested benefits may be able to claim either Housing Benefit (HB) or the housing element of Universal Credit (UC) to help pay their rent. One of the key issues facing our clients, when the majority are on low income and/or in receipt of HB or UC, is finding accommodation that they can afford. Shortfall in rent is a common problem. Local Housing Allowance (LHA) is the rent figure usually used to work out HB or the housing element of UC for most private tenants.

LHA rates are based on the number of bedrooms a household is allowed: The rates are:

Local Housing Allowance.

Room Need	Weekly LHA Rate	Monthly LHA Rate
Shared room	£96.66	£420.01
1 Bedroom	£131.18	£570.01
2 Bedroom	£156.49	£679.99
3 Bedroom	£189.86	£824.99

There has been a recent article on Devon Live that states that rental prices have increased in the area. Many clients state that they have looked for private accommodation but cannot afford it as what is on offer is not affordable.

A research from November 2020 shows that Exeter has seen the highest increase in average rent across the whole of England over the past five years. Average rent in the city has jumped an incredible 39% in five years, according to findings from international rental marketplace [Spotahome](#).

According to numbers from the [Office for National Statistics](#), in 2015 the average monthly rent stood at £853. It has gone up to £1,201 - a £337 difference....and it is still rising.

Today figures for Exeter from [home.co.uk](#):

Exeter Market Rent Summary 01/06/2021

Our rental price analysis for Exeter summarises the advertised rents for homes to let, calculated daily from the rental properties found by the [Home.co.uk](#) Property Search Engine

Summary of [Properties for Rent in Exeter](#)

Total properties for rent in Exeter:	251
Properties for rent in Exeter listed in the last 14 days:	42
Average property rents in Exeter:	£1,003 pcm
Median rent:	£849 pcm

[Properties for Rent in Exeter](#) by Price

	No. of properties
Rent under £250 pcm	0
£250 to £500 pcm rent	26
£500 to £1,000 pcm rent	156
£1,000 to £2,000 pcm rent	50
£2,000 to £5,000 pcm rent	19

[Rent over £5,000 pcm](#)

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Property Rents in Exeter by Number of Bedrooms

	No. of properties	Average rent	Median rent
One bedroom	63	£733 pcm	£702 pcm
Two bedrooms	71	£997 pcm	£897 pcm
Three bedrooms	26	£1,205 pcm	£1,023 pcm
Four bedrooms	12	£1,912 pcm	£2,048 pcm
Five bedrooms	4	£2,556 pcm	£3,153 pcm

Property Rents in Exeter by Type

	No. of properties	Average rent	Median rent
Room	29	£617 pcm	£498 pcm
Flat	139	£996 pcm	£880 pcm
House	66	£1,214 pcm	£899 pcm

Note: The current rents for Exeter were calculated by sampling over all properties for rent in the [Home.co.uk](#) property search within five miles of the centre of Exeter.

As evidenced, average shortfall between a market rent and the maximum amount payable in HB (LHA) is £200 per month or more (for example, LHA for two-bedroom property is £679.99, while the average rent is £997 per calendar month).

There is pressure in Exeter's private rented market, with high competition for properties and confidence in tenants low. The expanding student market has significantly inflated the larger family property market, as higher income and greater security from parental guarantors can be gained through shared student lets.

A research released in December 2020 shows the demand for property in Exeter more than doubled since the easing of lockdown restrictions and the introduction of a Stamp Duty holiday. Recent Housing Action Team (HAT) enquiries with estate agents have shown that houses are being snapped up within a month of coming onto the market, many from the landlords who were previously letting their properties, and want to sell now making a huge profit. There are sometimes more than 100 applications for a rented property.

If there is a gap between provision and housing such that it could lead to homelessness and hardship as a city how can we work with private sector and social landlords and other agencies and housing advice services to improve the situation in the short to immediate term?

Exeter is a small city and access to affordable private sector housing is therefore limited. The Housing Access Officers approach all letting agents and known local landlords to establish why they are reluctant to offer properties to applicants who are on a low income and/or in receipt of HB or UC. Perception of risk by private landlords

by letting to those people, especially feelings of insecurity of rent payments, was stated as a major reason for avoiding renting to low income (including homelessness) clients.

Landlords clearly perceive a greater risk is associated with letting to HB/UC claimants and homeless people (risk of arrears, damage to the property and other breaches of tenancy, difficulty managing these tenants, problems with benefit administration). Landlords generally prefer to rent to tenants who are low risk and have previous renting history if not exemplary records. Some landlords cannot let their properties to these clients (and the majority of them are in receipt of HB or UC) as some insurance companies will not cover these groups or ask for higher premiums if the property was let to a HB claimant (increased deposit and at least six week's rent in advance, guarantors, references). Sadly, some mortgage lenders still don't let landlords who have mortgage loans with them to let their properties to tenants who are on benefits.

However, the Housing Access Team (HAT) works hard to access, not only affordable, private rented accommodation, but also a range of alternative forms of accommodation, such as almshouses, hard to let social housing, or accommodation provided by partner organisations such as St. Petrocks. The HAT team advertises for private landlords through a range of outlets including social media, as well as more traditional ways such as leaflets in Council Tax bills and at local libraries etc. Once a potential landlord contacts our service with a suitable property, the HAT team can undertake the entire process needed from property inspections to drafting tenancy agreements, and undertaking the tenancy sign-up if needed. In Exeter's very competitive market, HAT has been building its reputation for reliability and support by assisting the landlords in resolving any arising problems.

HAT focused on developing a right to the Private Rented Sector Access Scheme (PRSAS) with the main aims and objectives of securing suitable and affordable accommodation for clients and sustainment of potential tenancies. The "Housing Access Together" scheme has been set up to assist people who approach us for help in securing accommodation in the private rented sector. HAT work closely with a wide range of landlords, as well as partner agencies, both in terms of accessing suitable accommodation, and in maintaining these tenancies. We have a fund available to help cover rent in advance or deposits needed, removal costs and covering the cost of furniture if needed. We work with a wide range of homeless, or potentially homeless clients, from single people to large families. As well as accessing private rented or other forms of accommodation, we work with clients and landlords to maintain these tenancies, providing a support service should these tenancies experience any difficulties.

It is also important to address clients' expectations, which can sometimes be unrealistic, or very focused on accessing social housing. Many homeless, or threatened with homelessness, clients are still prepared to hold out for social tenancy and are reluctant to accept realistic expectations or even apply for social housing in the neighbouring areas close to Exeter. Many are still apprehensive about living in the private sector as private sector accommodation is dominated by the lack of long term security with short tenancy agreements and little protection against rent rises.

A multifaceted approach is needed to understand and tackle local issues when it comes to the PRSAS current circumstances in Exeter. HAT, together with other teams within Housing Needs, review regular plans of actions with a range of options to increase the supply of private rented accommodation and prevent homelessness arising from private rented housing, whilst meeting the duties of the Homelessness Reduction Act. Although it is a significant daily task, we are becoming more

competitive in Exeter's very challenging market. Current workstreams include trialling third party property management to act as the "middle" agent for brokering private rented properties to homeless clients and remodelling a social lettings scheme with charitable partners.

In particular what lessons can the City Council learn from housing schemes like the Exeter Community Trust initiative?

The Council is not pivotal to the planning or operation of the scheme and has not commissioned any part of the service nor provided any direct or any indirect funding for it. The Council has also not been given, or asked to give, any direction in any aspect of the scheme set-up including property identification or design of the model and its operation going forward. The Council has however given assistance to this scheme through referrals. The Council has learnt lessons from sharing good practice with housing scheme providers such as the YMCA and other local authorities and in participating in Local Government Information Unit briefing meetings.

Supplementary question and answer.

What assurance can be given that the low paid and vulnerable and those in Universal Credit will be rehoused and that no one will become homeless?

The City Council can be contacted for assistance and it will be important for individuals to follow the guidance and advice already supplied to Members in my answer.

The Portfolio Holder thanked Council officers for their hard work and commitment in the provision of this service.

Councillor Vizard

Please could the appropriate Portfolio Holder, Director or Officer advise whether the Council or Devon Wildlife Trust have any data or information on the success of the swift tower on the Paris Street roundabout in attracting these migrating birds during this time of the year?

Councillor Harvey, the Portfolio Holder for City Management, gave the following response:-

The City Council has no specific information but we asked our colleagues at Devon Wildlife Trust. They responded that the routine monitoring of the site by their volunteers was disrupted by the Pandemic and has not as yet restarted. The sounds to attract swifts are still being broadcast on a timer but the time taken for swifts to colonise an artificial swift nest can be seven years or more. Anecdotally, it is suggested that the site hasn't been used by swifts as yet but has and continues to be used by other birds. There are swifts nesting on the Jury's Inn so they are nearby and it is hoped that they will make use of the tower soon.

Councillor M. Mitchell

Will any trial regarding the new waste collection service involve a range of different routes within the city to ensure that the new service will be available to all households in Exeter?

Response

Yes

Supplementary question and answer.

What assurance can be given that residents' re-cycled waste does not end up in landfill in the UK or abroad?

Materials Recycling Facility (MRF) staff work very hard to sort materials to ensure a high quality finished product for sale. The service is working on a commercial basis and organisations across the city are reassured that waste is re-cycled and disposed of appropriately and that the highest price is secured when sold on.

Councillor Sparling

1) In October 2019 the Council approved the expenditure of £1,500,000 to improve the MRF, showing a return on investment over three years on the capital costs. What is the new budget for upgrading the MRF and why; and what is the expected period for return on investment to recoup capital costs?

Response

Following the initial review of re-cycling in October 2019 much has changed in people's recycling habits and demands as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic. The waste management team therefore had to review operational procedures during this period and, at the same time, ensured that no bin was missed during collections. This work prompted a further review of the service and a revised service is the subject of a report to Executive on 6 July 2021.

There is a cost to the Authority of approximately £200,000 per annum through the use of secondary MRF providers due to machinery breakdowns. It is therefore important for the efficiency of the MRF that there is investment in the equipment in order to improve MRF reliability and resulting productivity which, in turn, should help to increase income and resulting reduction in the reliance of secondary MRF providers and their associated costs. However, at this stage, there is no payback anticipated for the new recycling project.

Supplementary question and answer.

In view of Liveable Exeter's proposals for Marsh Barton how long will the MRF remain in its current location and be able to sustain value for money investment?

Because there will be many issues for Liveable Exeter to address before its plans come to fruition and as there is also significant commercial interest in investing in the area close to the MRF, it is difficult to predict timescales and officers are fully aware of these circumstances.

2) After consideration of a number of options, in October 2019 Council adopted Option 4 on the grounds of lowest cost, lowest net CO2 emissions, improved re-cycling rate and meeting most residents' wishes to have food waste and glass collected for re-cycling at the kerbside. The other alternative option to delay a decision on implementing a service change pending publication of forthcoming statutory guidance on consistency in waste collection services and the likely impact of Extended Producer Responsibility was explicitly rejected. Are you now recommending overturning that decision that Council made?

Response

Notwithstanding the further guidance expected from the Government on re-cycling, the Council will shortly bring forward a revised scheme, which seeks to respond appropriately and as cost effectively as possible to changing re-cycling habits.

Difficulties with waste re-cycling volumes are being experienced in a neighbouring authority and residents have been told to take cardboard to the tip thereby increasing the CO2 emissions due to the higher volumes of recycling being presented.

The Council's sustainable credentials are evident through other schemes such as developing a solar field next to the energy from waste plant. The Deposit Return System is also to be commended.

Supplementary question and answer.

What is your view of Exeter's reputation of re-cycling and what will be the increase in re-cycling rates the new service will bring and by when?

An increase of 20% from 30% to 50% is anticipated when fully operational. Exeter residents put into the energy from waste plant considerably less per household than most district councils in the country and Exeter is the 9th lowest city in this respect. This input is a better measure than the actual re-cycling rate.

3) The operational issues at the MRF has affected financial performance of the MRF. Previous reports for 2018/19 indicated an overspend of £213,300. Was that the final figure? What was the overspend or necessary increase in budget required for 2019/20 and 2020/21 to deal with ongoing operational problems?

Response

The figures provided by the Council's Treasury services are set out below:-

	Budget	Actual	Overspend
2018/19	109,690	322,993	213,303
2019/20	141,970	701,378	559,408
2020/21	393,810	883,640	489,830

Supplementary question and answer.

How will the Council fund the increased budget for the MRF. Will it result in an increase in loan re-payments and will any services need to be cut ?

The question will be referred to the Section 151 Officer for a response to be given.

18 Spotlight Review - Consultation Charter

On behalf of the Corporate Manager Policy/Communications/Community Engagement, the Corporate Manger Democratic and Civic Support presented the report which sought agreement to adopt a Consultation Charter, setting out the

Council's commitment to best practice in consultation and to ensure a consistent approach to consultation arrangements.

The report had been brought forward after consideration by a Spotlight Review Working Group and Councillor Atkinson, as Chair of the Group, advised that the recommendations had been agreed unanimously by this cross-party group. She commended the report to the Committee.

The following responses were provided in respect of questions submitted by a Member of this Committee prior to the meeting:-

1. Does the Consultation Charter include planning applications?

Arrangements for consultation on planning applications are determined by specific regulations.

2. How does the Council plan to engage those who do not have digital access throughout a consultation process?

Consultation plans will need to set out how all audiences will be consulted. Previous consultations have included a range of methods, including public meetings, exhibitions, focus groups, targeted mailings, face-to-face and telephone interviews and printed material.

3. How will officers be supported to assess and address the carbon/environmental impacts of both the proposals and the consultations?

Officers will work with the Council's Net Zero team to obtain guidance and advice on assessing and addressing the carbon/environmental impacts of both the proposals and the consultations

A Member asked for consideration to be given to an additional element to be added to the report. He felt that criteria for calling for a consultation should be formalised and the mechanisms to enable a consultation to be called set out. He suggested that, at present, a consultation process was instigated by officers and that the means for Members as well as the public to seek appropriate consultations should be identified. He also referred to the consultative process followed in respect of planning applications, suggesting that a guidance document could be produced to ensure that developers consulted fully on their proposals.

It was noted that the report stated that "any consultation could be proposed through the scrutiny process" and that the consultation on planning matters was a matter for the Planning Committee.

The Chair of the Spotlight Review Working Group referred to the undertaking in the draft Charter to consult residents and other stakeholders whenever a decision will directly affect them and which would also have regard to equality impact issues, emphasising the need for a degree of flexibility in this process. She also stated that any Member could raise questions on behalf of residents through existing processes.

A proposal for the draft Charter to be amended to include reference to formalise criteria for calling for a consultation and to set out mechanisms to enable a consultation to be called was moved and seconded put to the vote and LOST.

Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee supported the recommendation that the Executive recommend to Council approval of the Consultation Charter.

19 **Presentation on the Role of Scrutiny**

The Corporate Manager Democratic and Civic Support spoke on the role of scrutiny, the current system having been introduced in October 2019 with an undertaking to review after a year. Because of the Covid-19 Pandemic, a review had not been possible, although both Scrutiny Committees had received valuable briefings through a question and answer process since the beginning of the crisis. It was now the intention to commence the promised review and for recommendations to be brought to Executive and Council this Autumn.

The Corporate Manager reminded Members of the important role of scrutiny within the democratic process and of the following three distinct aspects:-

- holding Executive to account such as through the call-In process with Members also able to question Portfolio Holders on their areas of responsibility;
- opportunities to contribute to policy development with the Council's Forward Plan, which is published monthly, providing advance notification of matters to be brought forward and which can be considered first by Scrutiny Committees prior to report to Executive; and
- examination of specific matters in greater detail through Task and Finish Groups, a good recent example being the Buller Statue Task and Finish Group.

The Corporate Manager also made the following points:-

- the role of the Scrutiny Programme Board in assessing requests for in depth reviews. It was the intention for the Board to identify a work plan and timescale of future items of business for scrutiny having regard to the best use of resources, corporate objectives and equality of workload between the two Scrutiny Committees;
- the recent circulation of profoma for Members to put forward such requests. These to be assessed first by the Strategic Management Board prior to consideration by the Scrutiny Programme Board. Requests already made by Members would receive priority consideration; and
- the commitment to build on the good progress made on developing the scrutiny function in the Council taking on board good practice and examples within other authorities.

A Member suggested that the production of an annual scrutiny report as well as building into the Committee cycle, a formal review of scrutiny would enhance the overall scrutiny process within the Council. The Chair confirmed that reviewing the operation of scrutiny would be of great value, including the potential for training, particularly for new Councillors.

The Corporate Manager advised that the review of scrutiny would be one of the elements to be considered by the soon to be constituted Governance Review Board which would be reporting to Executive and Council in the Autumn.

Members noted the update.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.44 pm

Chair

DRAFT