

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7 October 2021

Present:

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

Apologies:

Councillors Quance and Sparkes

Also present:

Service Lead Housing Tenancy Services, Service Lead Housing Needs & Homelessness, Service Lead Revenues, Benefits & Customer Access and Democratic Services Officer (HB)

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

20 **Minutes**

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

21 **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

22 **Questions from the public under Standing Order No 19.**

No questions from members of the public were received.

23 **To receive questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order No. 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 Allcock, Sparling, Vizard and Wardle. The responses of the respective Portfolio Holder are set out in italics.

Question to the Portfolio Holder for Supporting People – Cllr Williams

Councillor Wardle

Following many reports that local people in the South West are being out priced from renting privately due to the increase in holiday homes, second homes and airbnb lettings, can the Portfolio Holder clarify the extent of this problem within the Exeter City Council area and whether a co-ordinated response with other Councils is planned, including some form of local taxation and regulation?

Response

The situation in Exeter is similar to other Devon authorities but there are also differences as Exeter does not have the same problem with holiday lets but does experience changes in people's living arrangements in coming to live and work in new locations. In the longer term it is hoped that the Council's Liveable Exeter Vision of providing 12,000 homes by 2040 will provide a solution especially the provision of affordable homes for rent and purchase.

The challenge of affordability and supply is a significant one in Exeter as well as in the surrounding districts and Devon and Cornwall as a whole. The Housing Needs service has a small private rented access team that works with letting agents and landlords directly brokering homeless individuals and families into private rented property wherever suitable. The service provides a landlord incentive package including financial support to tenants (e.g. deposit and/or rent in advance, references, finders fees and/or home improvement subsidy and ongoing landlord and tenancy support).

The number of landlords approaching the Council has reduced over the last 18 months primarily as a result of the pandemic. The single most common reason behind the reduction in local lets is that landlords have been selling up during this time of inflated housing prices. A survey of 11 local lettings agents this week confirmed that properties are not being lost to holiday lets or airbnb's but being bought as homes particularly by people moving into the area from other parts of the country, London being frequently cited.

Agents report figures ranging from 40% to 60% reduction in the number of properties coming onto the local rental market. They also report that minimum tenant income thresholds have risen to 3 x the monthly property rent (previously 2 to 2.5 x). This is likely to be the result of demand far exceeding supply meaning landlords can exercise more choice, including financial security, in their selection of tenants.

Our survey of agents suggests a minimal transfer of property lets to the local student market but a notable reduction in the buy-to-let market. Agents report that changes in taxation alongside costs associated with rising property quality standards have also driven up sales of former tenanted homes. Demand for tenancies has significantly increased with 100% of agents reporting an increase in interest from prospective tenants. Some agents have reported "phenomenal" and sustained rises in demand e.g. up to 70 viewing requests for a one-bed property within 24 hours of being advertised. Other agents have reported tenants offering up to £200 over the asking rent for one and two bed properties.

Despite less landlords approaching the Council's housing access service the actual number of lets in the year to date (April 2021 – present) is broadly on track with last year's outcomes (31 lets in the six months to date compared to 66 in the 12 months from April 2020 to March 2021). Pre-pandemic letting figures were lower than this so there is no discernible pattern of reduction in actual outcomes at present. However the lack of churn of tenancies, as households have generally not moved on during the pandemic, may yet render an impact in the next six months.

To my knowledge the question of regulation and control has not been raised as such. District housing services have discussed the challenges being faced in the private rented market but have primarily focused on more creative and incentivised offers to attract landlords rather than run the risk of turning them away to other less social sources of tenants such as private letting agents.

Supplementary question and answer.

Can the City Council review all holiday letting within its area to ensure the owners are paying the proper amounts for waste collection and recycling?

Can the Council also actively seek the co-operation of other Devon authorities to lobby the Government to review all holiday accommodation to ensure that it is properly regulated and to allow local councils to be able to charge council tax on such accommodation rather than, as in many reported cases, claim small business rates as self-catering accommodation?

Answer

Due diligence has been met in respect of this situation in Exeter with no detriment to the Council and co-ordinated action by Devon authorities to examine and seek solutions to this problem would be helpful.

For a holiday let to be business rated in Exeter (and therefore eligible for business grants and any relevant relief) the business owner must satisfy criteria that the holiday let is a genuine business. This will include proving that the accommodation is available for a large period of the year (over 30 weeks) on a commercial basis to be booked either via a website or using holiday let agencies or other methods etc. to fee paying public. Social media and internet investigation will be used to make sure this is the case as well as the business owner own declaration where reliefs are applied for.

Councillor Allcock

At the end of September, central government announced the creation of a £500 million Household Support Fund to help families in need meet essential living costs. Could the relevant Portfolio Holder provide an update on whether Exeter City Council will be administering this fund and, if so, when residents can expect more information on how to access these grants?

Response

Draft documentation is awaited from the Department for Work and Pensions on the Household Support Fund as they had contacted the Council on 1 October 2021 advising that they hoped to set out details of the scheme shortly (see Minute Number 24 below). What we know is that this new scheme is designed to help vulnerable households with the essentials, including food costs and utility bills. The fund will start in October and run over winter. Those in need of support and organisations interested in bidding for funding are being advised to contact their local authority, as it will be up to each local authority to decide precise eligibility for the scheme and how best to support members of their communities. When we know the details we will prepare a local scheme for member consideration and sign off. When the grant is live, those who have previously asked the Council for support will be contacted and it is hoped that support will be administered as efficiently as the assistance provided as part of the Covid Pandemic support scheme.

Supplementary question and answer.

Will the Council engage with the various community partnerships to ensure that as many as possible are reached?

Answer

Available support will be publicised through the range of media channels including the website and social media as well as the e newsletter to some 9,000 residents and partners such as Exeter Citizens Advice Bureau, Community Associations and Community Builders will also be involved.

Question to the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Culture – Councillor Ghusain

Councillor Allcock

As winter approaches, rocketing energy costs, the withdrawal of the £20 Universal Credit uplift and the end of the furlough scheme risk pushing hundreds of thousands of families into fuel poverty can the relevant Portfolio Holder(s) outline what support Exeter City Council is offering to Council and private tenants who are struggling to keep their homes warm or facing impossible choices between essential household expenditure?

Response

This issue overlaps across City Council portfolios and Councillors have already signed a petition on this matter. Exeter City Council is continuing to resource the Exeter Citizens Advice Bureau as part of a three year contract to provide advice, guidance and practical support to those residents suffering from financial hardship. We are continuing to support local community and charity food organisations by developing a local network to better focus resources and access to free food to those residents that need it most. We are supporting the health and wellbeing of residents across the city, and particularly those most disadvantaged through COVID by delivering our flagship programme, Wellbeing Exeter, to 2024.

Supporting residents in financial difficulty at this challenging time is a priority for the Council. As a landlord, we work closely with our tenants to help them meet their financial obligations using solutions tailored to the circumstances of the household. This includes checking they are claiming all they are entitled to, re-profiling rent payments due to us to create a temporary breathing space, and signposting to grants available as well as other avenues of support. We have limited discretionary funds that we can draw on to help in times of crises and those funds are used to help private tenants too. Our wellbeing support hub, as referred to above, set up during the initial stages of the pandemic continues to take calls and online requests for assistance and staff dealing with those requests draw on support available within the Council as well as drawing in support from community groups and voluntary agencies. Staff are aware of the two Government schemes available to alleviate fuel poverty, and will ensure information is available for residents, and if needed, help them to claim.

The warm home discount scheme provides a £140 rebate on energy bills to low income households. The scheme opens on 18 October and is a one-off discount on someone's electricity bill or gas bill. Eligibility is based on getting the guarantee credit element of pension credit or being on a low income and meeting the energy suppliers criteria for the scheme.

The cold weather payment scheme starts on 1 November and eligibility is dependent on getting certain benefits or support for mortgage interest. Recipients get £25 for each seven day period of very cold weather between November 2021 and 31 March 2022.

Question to the Portfolio Holder for Council Housing Development and Services – Councillor Wright

Councillor Allcock

Can the relevant Portfolio Holder provide an update on the Council's retrofit programme and what progress has been made to improve the energy efficiency of council housing and reduce fuel costs?

Response

With regard to the request for the update on the retrofit programme we confirmed earlier this year that we had successfully secured Government Grant of £1.1million to tackle fuel poverty in some of our least energy efficient homes. This funding is supported by direct contribution of £1.3 million from the Council (housing revenue account) and forms part of the objective for the Council to achieve carbon neutrality for its housing stock by 2030. The total package is therefore £2.4 million.

Delivery of the first phase of the programme for this year has seen £600,000 of the Government grant part funding the completion of energy retrofit measures to 120 properties - a further 100 properties will be completed by the end of the financial year utilising the remaining £500,000 grant. Activity has been focussed on properties in the Priory Ward of the City off Burnthouse Lane. The retrofit programme sees the whole house refurbished to deliver the very highest energy standards and includes a new heating system, wall and roof insulation, new windows and doors, and photovoltaic roof panels.

Early results for the completed first phase confirms that average energy performance (SAP) ratings have improved from SAP Band E to SAP Band B – with 42 of the first 120 properties achieving a SAP rating of A. We have reduced carbon emissions for the 120 properties from an average of 4.5 Tonnes per property per year to 0.4 Tonnes per property per year – a 90% reduction. We are working closely with our tenants on the affordable warmth aspects and, to date, we have seen some large reductions in tenant fuel bills, case studies and testimonies for which are currently being collated.

Question to the Portfolio Holder for Environment and City Management – Councillor Harvey

Councillor Vizard

Could the Portfolio Holder provide a brief update on the very welcome recent trial of electric powered waste collection vehicle, and the plans for rolling out kerbside food waste and glass collections?

The trial of the electric powered refuse collection vehicle (or 'eCollect' as christened by Dennis Eagle) proved to be a great success. It was here for a few days which gave a variety of crews and drivers the opportunity to try it out. Both drivers and loaders were all very positive about the vehicle and it completed the day's work on a single overnight charge with some to spare. The electric vehicle worked just as effectively as our normal diesel vehicle but with the added benefits of zero emissions and less noise for our loaders working alongside. We are now investigating the financial costs of leasing these vehicles over a number of years before we place our first order.

The first part of the food collection roll out will commence in the late autumn, in common with many areas of the UK manufacturing there have been delays in the supply chain which have pushed back the delivery of our food caddies. Our latest delivery date will give us enough containers for the first phase of the roll out.

With regard to kerbside glass collections we are still waiting for the outcome of the two Government consultations which impact on this area, including the proposed introduction of a deposit return scheme. The outcome of these consultation will impact on the volumes of glass we collect but may also come with associated Government funding for service transition. Once the revisions to statutory regulations are clearer, we can plan accordingly for our glass collection system.

Following my helpful recent discussion with the Interim Waste, Recycling and Fleet Lead about bins being left blocking pavements which can cause inconvenience and sometimes even dangerous detours into the road for people who may be elderly, disabled or who have pushchairs, could the Portfolio Holder or an officer please confirm:-

- a) whether to incentivise responsible behaviour by households and landlords, the Council will look again at charging for replacement green bins (as it does for black bins) that have had to be removed by the Council team after a reminder sticker has first been issued but ignored?; and

Response

We used to charge for green bins but this charge was removed in an effort to boost recycling rates. It is important to ensure that we capture everything which can be recycled to guarantee that it doesn't just simply end up in the residual waste bin. An additional green bin in larger households encourages recycling and we want to remove any barrier to recycling wherever we can.

We work hard with landlords every year prior to students returning, to ensure that they are clear about their responsibilities for waste and recycling but that unfortunately doesn't always transfer across to the tenants. We will continue to work with them to improve presentation of bins for collection and their removal afterwards.

- b) whether the Council will consider adding a function on the website for the public to report bins that have been left out on pavements or in roads after collection for, say, longer than 24 hours?

Response

Residents in Exeter are generally very good at putting their bins away after collection and bins left on streets are not a large problem across the city in general. There are however a few hot spots where we have to occasionally return to with reminders for people to take their bins in and keep the footpaths clear of obstructions. There is no specific reporting mechanism for this on the website currently but it could easily be reported via the general enquiry form. We could introduce a separate reporting channel for this but as the instances are fairly low it would be a lower priority when compared to some of our other planned improvements to reporting methods.

Councillor Sparling

Residents have been in contact asking for more details of the food waste collection service. Can the Portfolio Holder confirm if a page will be added to the Council's Bins

and Recycling webpage to include updates on the implementation of the Food Waste Collection trial and service rollout, with details such as areas to be covered in the trial and an estimated timeline of implementation of the trial and full rollout?

Response

The new service roll out has a fully developed communications package and will have a dedicated recycling communications officer. The information for residents will be spread across a range of media including our website, social media and sent directly in print form.

The first phase of the roll out will be used to gather information and data on productivity and highlight any problems or obstacles which will be used to tweak the remaining roll out across the City. Once that first phase has run for a reasonable length of time and we have the data we require, together with information from suppliers on lead times for new vehicles and containers, we can develop a detailed programme for the remaining phases.

Supplementary question and answer.

Is it the intention to discuss the rollout with residents etc. in the more difficult areas of the city such as the city centre?

Answer

Issues relating to obstacles on bin rounds, difficulties with communal bin storage and incorrect disposal in green/black bins are picked up by operatives of the waste collection vehicles and staff also examine individual streets and areas where problems could occur during collection.

Councillor M. Mitchell - Can the Portfolio Holder provide an update regarding the implementation and ongoing monitoring of the Clear Streets Charter?

Response

The Clear Streets Charter is managed jointly by Devon County Council and Exeter City Council. As legislation surrounding obstructions on the public highway is enforceable under the Highways Act, the inspections and any enforcement activity are undertaken by Devon County Council as Highway Authority. The inspections are tied in with their general safety inspections which look for defects such as trip hazards. Primary walking routes (which will include most of the commercial parts of the City Centre) are inspected monthly. Most enforcement so far has been of an informal nature with businesses complying once the danger to people with sight defects or those who are less mobile, has been explained. Informal discussions are not routinely recorded and to my knowledge there has not been any requirement for formal enforcement so far. In addition to these formal inspections, our operational staff, such as our street cleansing operatives who are regularly in the City Centre or other district centres, will highlight dangers to their supervisors as they come across them.

Action to tackle wheelie bins which are not put away after they have been emptied and are causing an obstruction, are dealt with under powers held by Exeter City Council as Waste Collection Authority. These are dealt with as they are reported by residents to the waste team.

The Clear Streets Charter is not just about footway obstructions and there are many other subjects included within it, such as planning for new developments, café licences and design of public spaces, where Exeter City Council has a much larger role. The full Charter is available to view on our website in the clean, safe, city section.

Supplementary question and answer.

As the implementation of the Charter involves multifaceted issues across a number of agencies, will the Portfolio Holder support scrutinisation of its implementation?

Answer

Yes, with the involvement of the County Council as a joint signatory to the Charter.

24 Presentation on Homelessness and associated issues

The Chair invited Councillor Denning to make a brief introduction as she had proposed potential evictions, the homeless and housing as a topic for scrutiny.

Councillor Denning advised that, with the removal of the Universal Credit uplift payment of £20 per week, more tenants in social and private housing would have difficulty in paying their rent and could become homeless. Moreover, families unable to pay their mortgages could also face losing their homes. The lifting of the ban on evictions could lead to additional homelessness with Exeter City Council being the first port of call for advice and help.

Councillor Denning had suggested a review of existing strategy to ensure that, in the event of a high level of evictions, the City Council, as well as other agencies, would be able to cope with the additional work load.

The Chair welcomed Laura Fricker, Service Lead, Revenues, Benefits and Customer Access and Richard Crompton, Service Lead Housing Needs and Homelessness who provided comprehensive presentations on their areas of work, the challenges being faced, the prevention and early interventions in place to address homelessness and further potential solutions with associated resource implications.

The Service Lead, Revenues, Benefits and Customer Access also provided an update on the draft documentation on the Household Support Fund recently published by the Department of Work and Pensions. The scheme would be operated through Devon County Council who would work collaboratively with Districts through the period 6 October 2021 to 31 March 2022. The Fund would primarily support households in the most need with food, energy and water bills. The information has been circulated separately to all Members.

The full presentation has been circulated separately to all Members.

Members recognised the challenges being faced by the service, noting in particular the pressures associated with the average case load of 50 clients per case officer and the recent increasing trend in homelessness and victims of domestic abuse. Mindful of current officer workload, a review by a small working group was suggested which could focus on the design of the existing system and potentially identify savings. The involvement of Exeter Citizens Advice Bureau and the Exeter Community Trust could also be beneficial.

Councillor Denning moved that a Task and Finish Group be set up to review the support being offered to those presenting themselves at risk of homelessness and/or victims of domestic abuse. The motion was seconded by Councillor Pearce, put to the vote and carried.

The Chair advised that the Scrutiny Programme Board would be asked to agree the way forward including representation on the working group.

25 **Forward Plan of Business**

Members noted the Forward Plan.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.35 pm

Chair