

REPORT TO CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2 FEBRUARY 2023

PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S REPORT TO SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

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1. Issues relating to achieving the Council's published priorities

1. Public Realm – The recruitment of temporary and full time operatives remains difficult across Public Realm Services, with a particular impact to the low skilled roles within Street Cleansing. This has seen reduced delivery in litter, detritus deep clean, and in Graffiti Hotwash removal, periodically throughout the Financial Year.

-The service has implemented statutory prioritisation plan that reduces the short-term reliance on temporary staffing to cover absences and immediate labour requirements.

-The service has also subsequently identified career development pathways for low skilled roles, and is revising advertisements to reflect this potential benefit. Alongside the recent pay agreement, the Public Realm employment offer is now a more competitive offer as a result, and whilst this may not be a complete resolution of recruitment constraints, it will provide better business continuity moving forward.

2. Engineering – Constraints to the recruitment of skilled and experienced engineering officers, particularly in respect of Capital delivery roles, has resulted in resource shortages and a reduced capacity to deliver non-critical capital projects.

-Capital budget constraints have partially reduced the impact that resources shortages have had, by reducing the number of non-critical projects that are financially supported, and therefore workloads. However, there remain significant shortages in the availability of skilled engineers nationally and, as a result, recruitment is likely to remain problematic.

-The service continues to investigate alternative industry and partnership sourcing options and, in the meantime, will continue to prioritise critical and safety required project delivery.

3. Environmental Health and Community Safety – recruitment remains an issue which is affecting the service. However it is hoped that this will be resolved in the early part of 2023.

4. Local Economy – over the winter of 2022/23 a number of retail and hospitality businesses have closed down in the city centre: over the previous six months six City Centre units have closed down. These closures are due to the unforeseen increases of running costs; having to repay bounce back loans and deferred VAT; as well as challenges to recruit into vacant positions and the hike in energy costs - for some businesses costs are higher than their rent. On the flip side, there is still an appetite for new businesses opening within the city centre (eight new businesses opened in the last six months, which isn't the case elsewhere across the county), as they don't have bounce back loans and deferred VAT to pay.

- Some hospitality businesses are **reducing** their opening hours, due to the rise in energy costs, challenges in recruitment and the cost of importing raw materials from overseas (due to Brexit, import duty is now payable).

- Across the city centre retail, hospitality and health and social care are struggling to recruit into vacant positions. This is having an impact on the viability and profitability of the business, with some businesses closing down. The increase in the Living Wage in April 2023 will also impact on these sectors.

-Train station usage has been recently released, overall patronage is still down on 2019 figures, but the bounce back in Devon is over and above other areas across the UK. In Exeter, there is growth in short journeys across the city related to St James Park, Polsloe Bridge and Pinhoe - which could be attributed to recent challenges with city buses. Between April 2021 and March 2022, 2.2 million people used (entries & exists) Exeter Central Train Station which is the busiest train station in Devon. Across the UK there are 2,569 train stations, Central Train Station is the 155th busiest with St David's being the 157th busiest. Exeter Central Train Station has similar patronage numbers as Bedford, Manchester Airport, Stoke on Trent and Ipswich.

3. Update or commentary on any major ongoing programmes of work

1. **Trews weir** – Engineering team have secured £165,000 Environment Agency funding for initial studies and an outline business case for a suitable/cost effective repair option. Sourcing and contract for the study supplier is pending.

2. **Play refurbishment programme** – 2023/24 financial year will see the refurbishment of Exwick and Lakeside play areas completed after local consultations were carried out. Also the replacement of limited equipment across 15 other sites.

3. **Play Parks** – there are 15 sites pending new equipment in 2023/24, and a complete refurbishment is planned, consulted, and budgeted for Lakeside.

4. **Ash Die Back (ADB)** - ADB continues to progress across the Exeter

Ash population. Progress has been slower than originally anticipated however the service anticipates that, as ADB reaches more isolated woodland, and as the disease is currently low risk, as trees mature increases in ADB levels will accelerate across City Council tree stocks. (88% of City Council Ash trees are showing Low level disease, and 722 trees have been identified as having ADB to date though this number may rise.)

5. **CCTV Upgrade** – the upgrade to the Control Centre equipment is nearing completion. Work has commenced on installing new cameras as part of the latest Safer Streets funding.

6. **Licensing** – A review of Hackney Carriage Fares has been completed. The Licensing Committee is continuing to hold its working groups reviewing Street Trading and Private Hire and Taxi Licensing.

7. **Food Safety/Health and Safety** – the service is on course to complete its programme of work as laid out in the Food Law/Health and Safety Service Plan.

8. **Local Economy**- City Point has the opportunity to drive growth in the City Centre. The up and coming demolition of the old bus station should be seen as an opportunity in trailing and testing meanwhile uses on site to support the wider city centre economy.

4. Issues that may impact : services delivery/financial performance/future budget requirements

1. **Inflationary increases** – supplies, materials, and commercial rates have continued to rise significantly. This has seen prices increase substantially and will put strain on revenue budgets over the next financial year. This rise is universal across Public Realm, Bereavement Services, Public Toilets, Allotments and Engineering as well, and will affect all budget areas similarly.

2. **Bereavement Services income** – Low income levels, relating to a drop in burials per annum. This is likely to be ongoing putting strain on service budgets.

3. **Recruitment of staff** – as detailed above

3. **City Centre Economy**: The outcomes of the One Exeter programme may impact work undertaken, which supports the City Centre, as well as the business community.

4. If there is a rise in the number of shop closures within the City Centre, this would have a detrimental impact on the wider city economy, as the City Centre is one of the economic drivers for the rest of the city.

5. In the long term, this may impact Business Rates and Car Park income. Having University of Exeter student accommodation and Exeter College located within the City Centre, provides a cushion for the City Centre, as students spend in retail and hospitality. The Energy Bill Relief Scheme,

{financial support for business} is due to stop by the end of March 2023. This will have an impact on the viability of some businesses in the City Centre.

5. Potential changes to services/provisions being considered

There are none agreed changes at present. However, there are requirements for budgetary savings both for the statutory and discretionary services. These may bring changes in the future.

6. Other matters the Portfolio Holder wishes to raise with the Scrutiny Committee

1- Following the Engineering, Waterways and Parking Service Manager leaving the Council in September, the following changes were made:

- The Control Room (CCTV, Home Call and Out of Hours Emergencies) was transferred into Environmental Health and Community Safety
- Engineering was transferred into Public and Green Spaces
- Car Parks was transferred into Net Zero and Business
- Waterways and Harbourmaster reports to the Director

2- Consideration may be given to the feasibility and delivery potential of a Community Based network to promote Reuse and Repair activities through Reuse Hub(s). Current examples in Exeter: Library of things, Scrapstore and Men in Sheds, the Repair Café at St Sidwell's Community Cent etc.

3- Businesses have highlighted issues employees face on a daily basis in travelling into the city centre. Some buses do not turn up at their designated time, which results in some staff being late for their retail/hospitality business opening.

4- Discussions continue with InExeter on improvements that can be made to the city centre to attract additional shoppers and visitors. During 2022 InExeter ceased promoting the city to visitors and shoppers, which is now undertaken by Visit Exeter. InExeter now focuses on supporting

businesses within the boundary of InExeter, as well as the future of the city centre.