

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

30 March 2023

Present:

Councillor Matthew Vizard (Chair)
Councillors Mitchell, M, Bennett, Ellis-Jones, Holland, Snow, Sparling, Sutton, Wardle and Warwick

Apologies:

Councillors Foale, Harvey, Newby and Oliver

Also present:

Service Lead - Environmental Health and Community Safety and Democratic Services Officer (HB)

In attendance:

Councillor Ghusain	Portfolio Holder City Management and Environmental Services
Councillor Pearce	Portfolio Holder Communities and Homelessness Prevention
Councillor Williams	Portfolio Holder Recycling, Waste Management and Waterways
Councillor Wright	Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder Arts and Culture and Corporate Services

9 **Minutes**

Subject to the deletion of the last bullet point in Min. No. 5 and the insertion of the following:-

The following question had been submitted by Councillor Bennett to the Portfolio Holder for City Management and Environmental Services:-

Many residents have told me they take their lives into their own hands using the uncontrolled crossings to access St. Sidwell's Point, the cinema, job centre and the bus station. Whilst I understand that highways decisions are the responsibility of Devon County Council, does the Portfolio Holder agree that urgent action needs to be taken to redesign this area so that people of all ages can arrive safely and easily on foot or by bike?

Response

Thank you for your question. I haven't personally experienced any difficulties on these crossing points nor have I had any reports from residents. I would encourage any member of the public who has experienced problems at these crossing points to make sure that the County Council's Road Safety team are aware, so that they can complete the required assessment. I will also ask my fellow Councillors who sit on the Exeter Highways and Traffic Orders Committee to raise this location with the Committee, as an area of concern.

the minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 2 February 2023 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

10 **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

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

No questions had been received from members of the public.

12 **Questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order No. 20**

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20, the questions below to the Portfolio Holder for Customer Services and Council Housing - Councillor Denning - had been submitted by Councillors Snow and Vizard and had been circulated in advance to Members of the Committee. The questions were read out by the Chair and, in the absence of Councillor Denning, responded to by Councillor Wright, the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Arts and Culture and Corporate Services.

Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Customer Services and Council Housing - Councillor Denning

From Councillor Snow

With the continued rise in the amount of homelessness and longer waiting lists for social housing what impact does Right to Buy have on these urgent problems?

Can the Portfolio Holder please also let the Committee know?

1. How many Exeter City Council homes are sold in a year on average under 'Right to Buy'?

Response

Over the past six financial years the Council has on average sold 38 properties each year. So far in this financial year (2022/23) 36 properties have been sold.

2. What current discounts are available under Right to Buy and how are these linked to length of tenancies?

Response

The current maximum discount is a maximum of 70% of the value of the property or £87,200 whichever is the lower amount.

For a house a tenant would get 35% discount for between three and five years as a public sector tenant and 1% for every year over five years.

For a flat a tenant would get 50% discount for between three and five years as a public sector tenant and 2% for every year over five years.

3. What can HRA (Housing Revenue Account) spend the funds on from 'Right to Buy'?

Response

Exeter City Council could use retained receipts for social or affordable rents. Following changes to the funding arrangements in 2021 it was also now possible to use the receipts to finance a greater tenure mix of properties including shared ownership and First Homes (new home buying scheme for first time buyers to purchase at a discount)

4. Does the HRA get all of the funds from the selling of Exeter Council homes or does central Government take a percentage of the funds?

Response

Exeter City Council retained 100% of the receipts from Right to Buy. However, there were restrictions on how this money could be used, these were:-

- *the receipts being capped making up no more than 40% of the total costs of any new homes with the HRA or Social Landlords providing the remaining 60% of funding;*
- *the retained receipts must be spent within five years; and*
- *from April 2023 only 40% of the receipts can be used for acquisitions (rather than new build) reducing to 30% from April 2024.*

From Councillor Vizard

Regarding the Warm Homes Discount (WHD) scheme, it would be helpful to understand what contact Exeter City Council has had from Council tenants and other financially vulnerable households through our customer support functions, and if/how we might prioritise some of these households for further support grants, if it becomes clear that the toughening of qualifying criteria is driving further fuel poverty and stark choices for some between heating and eating. Although we will be coming out of the winter, the impact will continue to be felt.

The other aspect of this is understanding how many Council homes have a current Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) (although when produced as evidence, these appear to only be confirming households do not meet the criteria), and clarification of our policy with regard to EPC's.

Response

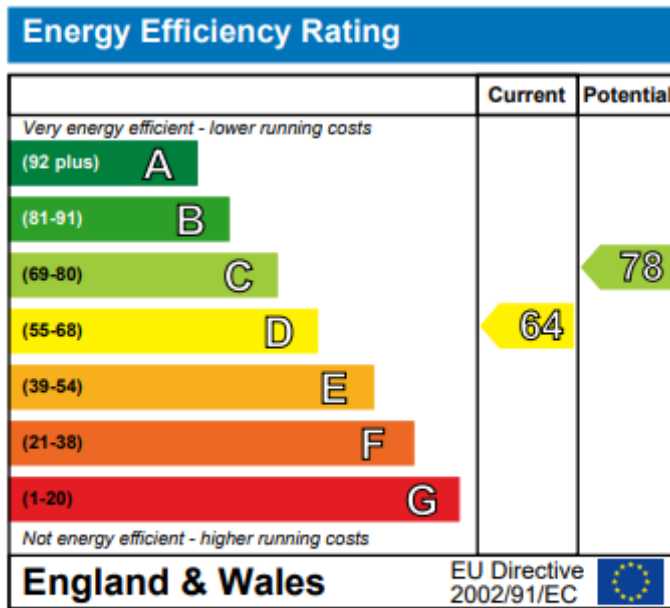
The Council currently had a total of 4,814 dwellings managed through the HRA, (Exeter City Council Decent Homes stock) and just over 57% (i.e. 2,769) of these have an EPC.

Seven EPC surveys had been carried out since January for tenant's who have requested them via Customer Services or Housing Officers specifically for the WHD.

The Council did not charge for an EPC, although there was no obligation on the Council as the landlord to provide EPC's to any tenants which had been in their homes prior to 2008/09 when the requirement came in to provide an EPC for any 'New' tenant. The EPC survey did provide valuable data on the property so officers would commence one if needed to keep the Asset Management Database up to date.

The WHD scheme information did not state what threshold was being used to determine eligibility as EPC banding's go from A (very energy efficient) to G (very poor), and it would be useful to know where the cut off was.

based on fuel costs and environmental impact based



The energy efficiency rating is a measure of the overall efficiency of a home. The higher the rating the more energy efficient the home is and the lower the fuel bills are likely to be.

There had been very little contact from residents regarding the scheme. Two residents had approached the Council for financial assistance saying that they had qualified for the WHD in previous years but not this year due to the energy rating. One didn't qualify this year because of improvements carried out by the Council to their Council property. A third resident was unhappy because they had been told that they had not qualified for the WHD because their energy performance certificate precluded them and wanted to discuss the certificate with someone as, in their opinion, the property being rented was not energy efficient.

The Council had a financial assistance policy which utilised money received under the Better Care Fund. This enabled the Council to support those that met the eligibility criteria within the policy with things like better insulation, window replacement, roof repair and other qualifying measures that might affect the energy performance of those who owned their own properties or were in rented accommodation. Full details could be found on the Council's website. In addition, every Council Tax bill sent included a leaflet containing signposting information to the financial assistance available through Environmental Health.

Regarding prioritising those no longer entitled to the WHD for financial support through the Household Support Fund (HSF) scheme 4, the concern would be the limited funding and not having any data to establish how many in Exeter now did not qualify, so no way of knowing if the funding could meet the demand.

So in terms of giving support for those affected, the Council could take the view that they would be eligible but not directly targeted. HSF scheme 4 was there to help people struggling with fuel costs, and the guidance asked the Council to prioritise people who have missed out on other help, so this could certainly be a group the Council would give extra consideration to through an application route.

Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Homelessness Prevention – Councillor Pearce

From Councillor Sutton

How and when were the Council advised by Devon County Council of their £1.5 million planned cuts to the homeless prevention services for over 18's and what will be the impact on the City Council and partner agencies and their clients?

Response

Devon County Council consulted on the proposed cuts, having already set and approved its budget in February which felt like a rubber stamping exercise and there is now a fear amongst the City Council's partner agencies that there will be a severe impact on the most vulnerable in the city as well as job losses within the agencies. Partner organisations including the YMCA, St. Petrocks, Sanctuary Housing Association and Bournemouth Churches Housing Association who run Gabriel House, have differing estimates of the potential impact and there is concern that some hostels across Devon might close. These, and other bodies, meet through the recently established Exeter Homelessness Forum to ensure robust responses and to continue lobbying. A co-ordinated response by District Councils and partner agencies is vital.

It was a short-sighted move and Devon County Council do not seem to have considered the knock-on impact that the cuts would have on their other service such as Adult Social Services as well as services run by other statutory bodies such as the City Council, the Police, the Prison and Health Services. It was also contrary to the Government's goal of ending homelessness.

It was hoped the County Council will learn from this mistake and consult in future.

Supplementary question and answer.

Do the County Council understand that the cost of prevention is ultimately less than that of dealing with the consequences?

Answer

It may be that further data would assist the decision making process as gaps have been identified in the County's impact assessment of the cuts. The City Council held monthly meetings with agencies tracking developments.

From Councillor Wardle

Did the County Council consult with the Police, Health Services and other statutory agencies and what is the view of the Police on these cuts?

Response

It was unclear whether the County Council would have alerted senior management at these bodies to the proposals, but it was apparent at the Exeter Homelessness Forum that the City Council's partner agencies were fearful that there would be a severe impact on the most vulnerable in the city as well as concern for their staff.

Supplementary question and answer.

Can the position on ward and other grants be clarified please?

Answer

£39,000 has been allocated for ward grants. Whilst several million in CIL payments are made to the Council, until they are lodged there is uncertainty as to the total available for grant making purposes during the year. Developments proceed across the city and payments are made available at certain times.

From Councillor Sparling

Can an update be provided on the Wellbeing initiative which is also impacted by the County Council cuts please?

Response

Devon County Council were still consulting on this and the other seven streams affected by the cuts but City Council. NHS and Sport England funding continues.

From Councillor Vizard

In light of the ending of the support for hotel accommodation for Afghan Asylum seekers, has the Government indicated whether there will be any other support/funding options for local authorities for this cohort and what will be the likely impact on housing provision in the city?

Response

Changes to the Council hosting of families through the Afghan Re-settlement Scheme had been expected and some 8,000 asylum seekers were set to leave bridging hotels by the end of the year, with a three month notice period spread across the remaining months. The City Council had recently bid for funding for eight properties to home Ukrainian refugees and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities would be approached to determine if the properties could also be used to house Afghans. Once the resettlement needs had been met, the longer term use of the houses would be for local authority determination e.g. housing and homelessness relief. In light of the support many of the asylum seekers had given UK Forces in Afghanistan it was appropriate to now provide assistance to them in this country.

13 Update from the Portfolio Holder for Customer Services and Council Housing - Councillor Denning

Councillor Wright, the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Arts and Culture and Corporate Services, on behalf of Councillor Denning, reported on the Customer Services and Council Housing on areas of the Portfolio, detailing the issues relating to achieving the Council's published priorities, major ongoing programmes of work, issues impacting delivery, financial performance and budget requirements and potential changes being considered.

The following responses were given to Members' queries:-

- the housing team was to be congratulated on its nomination for an award at the National Retrofit Academy;

- in identifying properties for retrofitting, the Council selected those at the lower end of Energy Performance and also sought to achieve economies of scale by converting blocks of properties, as opposed to pepper-potting across the city;
- there had been outstanding feedback from those living in retrofitted properties and the programme had helped empower tenants in their contribution to the Council's Net Zero ambitions for the city;
- without a change in national policy to enable Councils to build a much greater number of Council homes, the net figure of properties in Council ownership would continue to fall; and
- the ability of the Council to extend the retrofitting offer to the private sector remained an aspiration.

The Service Lead Environmental Health and Community Safety referred to a report to Executive on 4 April 2023 seeking to revise the Council's Financial Assistance Policy for the Better Care Fund to offer low cost loans for renovations/upgrades to homes for vulnerable individuals, both inside and outside of the mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant system.

The Chair thanked Councillor Denning for her report and thanked Councillor Wright for presenting the report on Councillor Denning's behalf.

14 **Community Safety Partnership - Presentation**

The Service Lead Environmental Health and Community Safety spoke to the attached presentation on the Community Safety Partnership.

The following responses were given to Members' queries:-

- the criteria of the respective Safer Street schemes had evolved over time. Safer Streets 2 had focussed on burglary, thefts from persons, robbery and vehicle crime, with Safer Streets 4 broadening the criteria, notably including the Safety of Women at Night (SwAN) scheme as well as anti-social behaviour;
- whilst bids had involved input from a number of partners, widening consultation had been difficult given the very demanding Home Office deadlines for bid submission. There was Councillor membership on the Partnership;
- as 50% match funding was required if bids were made by a local authority or the Police, a Partnership approach was preferable in funding terms and the University were able to bring special skill sets to the bidding process;
- three cameras were located in Northernhay Gardens, with two planned for Rougemont Gardens;
- the CCTV Control Room upgrade would greatly assist evidence gathering to help the Police in prosecutions. Control room staff were required to undergo appropriate training under the auspices of the Security Industry Authority;
- further extension of the camera network outwards from the centre remained the aspiration as well as replacing all remaining analogue cameras with digital, the greater cost of the former being the expansion of the fibre optic network;
- there were criteria for premises seeking to join the Best Bar None scheme and "secret shoppers" were also involved as part of the selection process; and
- Ann Hunter of InExeter had been awarded the Lorraine Cox Memorial Award at a recent Best Bar None Awards Ceremony.

Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee noted the report and thanked the Service Lead for his presentation.

15 **Forward Plan of Business and Forward Work Plan**

Members noted the Forward Plan and the Scrutiny Work Plan.

16 **Councillor Sutton**

The Chair announced that Councillor Rachel Sutton would be standing down at the forthcoming local government elections on 4 May 2023 and thanked her for her service on the Council.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 7.30 pm

Chair

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