

Minutes Extract from Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee – 28 November 2024

Minute No. 38 - Citizens Advice Exeter and Exeter City Council

The two Citizens Advice Exeter items on the agenda were presented jointly. After the representatives from Citizens Advice Exeter had introduced themselves, the Chair:

- encouraged all participants to avoid the divisive language of “sides;”
- reminded all attendees that this is not a Scrutiny of Council Officers, as the decision to halt the funding of Citizens Advice Exeter was a political one;
- explained that the Strategic Director – People and Communities was present to provide points of clarity if required; and
- requested that any Motions that Members wish to propose be formulated after the end of the debate.

She then invited Councillor Vizard, as Portfolio Holder for Communities, and Councillor M Mitchell, as originator of the Scrutiny proposal, to the table.

The Chair announced that the reports and appendices would be taken as read. She asked the originator of the Scrutiny proposal to open the debate. Councillor M Mitchell made the following comments:-

- it was important to move forward;
- the easy action for Members would be to take no action;
- Citizens Advice essentially wanted Exeter City Council to look at the matter again;
- the remit of this Scrutiny committee was to make a recommendation to the Executive;
- this issue would be revisited for the 2025-26 Budget;
- the present meeting did not mark the end of the conversation; and
- every District Council in Devon contributed financially to Citizens Advice except Exeter City Council.

During debate, Members expressed the following views:-

Councillor Fullam:-

- reminded Members of his current role working in social housing;
- noted media reports of rising demand for legal advice;
- wondered what capacity there was to fulfil such a role in the city; and
- wondered who people needing immigration advice and/or with a language barrier could turn to.

Councillor Harding:-

- raised the issue of the knock-on effect on ECC staff if people could no longer turn to Citizens Advice Exeter.

Councillor Moore:-

- raised the issue of data recording, remarking that Citizens Advice Exeter had sent regular updates to ECC;
- asked how the referrals had been monitored during the contract period;

- asked what contract management was in place; and
- asked if staff had been advised to stop issuing referrals.

Councillor Darling:-

- sought clarity regarding discrepancies around rent and service charges in the tables submitted by Citizens Advice Exeter; and
- asked why Citizens Advice Exeter had spent £75,000 on premises when premises had been offered to them by ECC.

Councillor Read:-

- felt that no overall monetary impact assessment on Council finances had been made; and
- wondered if it was likely to be plausible that there would be no impact.

Councillor Pole:-

- sought clarity and detail on the income and expenditure summary table submitted by Citizens Advice Exeter and queried why the figures Devon County Council, Exeter City Council and 'other' were presented jointly in a single column;
- raised the issue of performance indicators linked to the contract between ECC and Citizens Advice Exeter; and
- made reference to the work of the Churches Housing Action Team (CHAT) in Mid-Devon, whose services also included debt advice.

Councillor Wardle:-

- remarked that Citizens Advice Exeter had known about this issue for six and a half years; and
- noted that the costs of running the service had nearly doubled since 2018.

Councillor Rees:-

- reminded Members that supporting the vulnerable was at the heart of what a Council did; and
- asked Members if they agreed that early intervention was crucial to any long-term strategy.

Councillor Vizard:-

- agreed with Councillor Rees's last point, remarking that this was what Wellbeing Exeter did;
- reassured Members that none of the debate taking place was lost on the Executive;
- explained that, on the issue of data analysis, it was through the tendering process that such work could be done.

Councillor Patrick:-

- asked Citizens Advice if there were any current bids they felt confident about.

Councillor Miller-Boam:-

- asked Citizens Advice Exeter whether they would find a way to reduce their costs, should end funding be found.

The Citizens Advice Exeter representatives made the following comments:-

- the impact of the end of the Citizens Advice Exeter funding on the city of Exeter would be significant;
- there was no way of currently knowing where the people needing immigration advice and/or with a language barrier would go;
- Citizens Advice Exeter recommended a full EQIA;
- Citizens Advice Exeter had negotiated smaller premises;
- nobody had suggested to them that they could have free accommodation;
- moving into the ECC Customer Centre was not a practical solution when it had first been suggested, because of costs linked to the move but also because of the perceived stigma attached to coming into Council premises;
- Citizens Advice Exeter would be prepared to explore moving into a customer hub going forward;
- while it was currently impossible to assess the impact that the end of the funding would have on the city of Exeter, the plain facts were that Citizens Advice Exeter had reduced their services and that the demand was still there;
- the figures in the first column of the income and expenditure summary table were for Exeter alone;
- the Citizens Advice Exeter member of staff based at Exeter City Council was purely doing money advocacy;
- Citizens Advice Exeter shared some of their leadership costs with other Devon branches;
- Citizens Advice Exeter currently had a worker based at Trussell three days a week;
- there was nothing Citizens Advice Exeter could do about Local Authorities pulling funding, but by the same token CA could not change their services;
- all of Citizens Advice Exeter's funding other than crowdfunding had been in place for years;
- while Wellbeing Exeter did indeed play a part in early intervention as alluded to by Councillor Vizard, it did not replace the vital role played by Citizens Advice Exeter;
- over the last year, Citizens Advice Exeter had submitted bids totalling £56,000 and had expressed an interest in the Legal & General grant (worth max. £75,000 over three years);
- larger 'bidding pots' were becoming increasingly rare;
- Citizens Advice Exeter had already reduced their overheads, including reducing staff hours to avoid redundancies;
- the next step was to offer voluntary redundancy;
- stripping their offer back to just a telephone service with no premises would allow Citizens Advice Exeter to keep the project going; and
- constructive debates around Council funding issues were taking place in Devon and nationwide.

The Strategic Director – People and Communities made the following comments:-

- the ECC Housing & Homelessness Advice service contract had been awarded to Citizens Advice Exeter through a tendering process in the summer;
- referrals for this service come from Exeter City Council Housing Advisors;

- the Council was keeping track of all referrals made under the Housing & Homelessness Advice service contract; and
- a lot of detail went into the officer reports presented to Executive and to Council last year which members may wish to refer back to;
- there was no mechanism for ECC to make any objective judgement about what may or may not happen in terms of overall impact caused by any future reductions in Citizens Advice Exeter services; and
- ECC had been unable to identify any discernible impact on Council services from earlier reductions in Citizens Advice Exeter service levels.

The Chair invited Members to formulate any recommendations they may wish to put forward.

Councillor Moore remarked that information and guidance were becoming segmented and proposed the following recommendations:

- 1. To recommend that the Executive consider an annual grant to support the general work of Citizens Advice Exeter, based on the report presented to the Executive in January 2024;**
- 2. To recommend that the Executive consider working with the voluntary community sector to develop an information and guidance strategy to reduce inequality and poverty in Exeter.**

The Strategic Director – Corporate Resources & S151 Officer explained that, if such a recommendation was put forward, its authors would need to identify how it would be funded.

Councillor Vizard, invited to speak by the Chair, made the following remarks:-

- the Executive would consider everything put in front of them;
- it was important to bear in mind the limited funding available; and
- by singling out Citizens Advice Exeter for exceptional treatment over other VCSE organisations, Members would be setting a precedent and expectations that the council could not meet should other organisations then come and ask the council for the same treatment.

Councillor Pole proposed an amendment to Councillor Moore's recommendation. However, the Chair deemed it to be a wrecking amendment and consequently dismissed it.

During discussion on Councillor Moore's proposal, particular reference was made to:-

the statutory duty of a Council to offer support to people in a vulnerable position;

the need for Members to identify a budget line if they wished Citizens Advice Exeter funding to be re-examined.

Councillor Moore explained that her proposal was linked to the report from January 2024 Executive, which referred to reputational risk to the Council. The Strategic Director – People and Communities clarified that:-

- the point in her report Cllr Moore was referring to was in the "What are the risks?" section and did not constitute a recommendation to either Executive or Council; and
- the report submitted to Executive in January 2024 had formed the basis of the Executive decision.

Councillor Moore remarked that the risk in question had now happened and felt that the decision should be reconsidered.

The recommendation was proposed by Councillor Moore, seconded by Councillor Read, put to the vote, and DEFEATED.

Councillor Patrick proposed the following recommendation:-

To recommend that the Executive revisit options for Citizens Advice Exeter to reduce their premises expenses with Exeter City Council.

She also clarified that it did not necessarily mean the Civic Centre, reminding Members that ECC owned various premises. During debate on this recommendation, the following comments were made:-

- the Exeter City Council Chief Executive remarked that every offer of accommodation made to Citizens Advice Exeter so far had been turned down;
- on the same point, Councillor Wardle asked what had made Citizens Advice Exeter change their mind;
- the Citizens Advice Exeter Chief Executive Officer explained that the costs of moving premises had always been an obstacle, but that they now found themselves in a situation where something had to be done;
- the Citizens Advice Exeter CEO explained the shared leadership arrangements with Citizens Advice Torbay (namely Torbay paying for half of the costs), clarifying that the two entities were separate charities and she happened to be the CEO of both;
- responding to a question from Councillor Miller-Boam, the Strategic Director – People and Communities explained that all business cases were considered and that, while she could not comment on cost specifically, there was a willingness to continue to work with Citizens Advice Exeter to help them find a solution; and
- Councillor Fullam said he understood the issue of the stigma attached to walking into Council premises but welcomed the fact that both parties were working in the same direction and expressed gratitude to the Leader of the Council for attending the discussion.

Councillor Parkhouse proposed from the Chair that the Committee vote on the recommendation. This was agreed unanimously and, consequently, the recommendation was moved by Councillor Patrick, seconded by Councillor Harding, voted upon, and CARRIED.

A further two proposals were made by Members; however, both were dismissed by the Chair for being too similar to an earlier unsuccessful proposal.

The Chair gave Councillor M Mitchell the opportunity to offer his closing comments, which were as follows:-

- a step forward had been made as a result of the discussion;
- all parties had to be mindful of the fact that ECC may vacate the Civic Centre in two years' time;
- the present meeting was a good example of the power of scrutiny.