

STRATEGIC SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

3 April 2025

Present:

Councillor Councillor Liz Pole (Chair)

Councillors Mitchell, M, Atkinson, Haigh, Hughes, Jobson, Knott, Moore, Palmer, Rees, Rolstone, Snow and Williams, M

Also present:

Strategic Director for Place, Head of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer, Legal Advisor, Place Partnership (Sport England) Manager and Democratic Services Officer (LS)

In attendance as Portfolio Holder:

Councillors Bialyk, Foale, Williams, R and Wood

61 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 January 2025 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

62 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

63 Questions from Members of the Public Under Standing Order No.19

There were no questions submitted by the public.

64 Questions from Members of the Council Under Standing Order No.20

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20, the following question was submitted by Councillor Wetenhall in relation to the Portfolio of Councillor Wood who attended the meeting. The question was circulated at the meeting to Members of the Committee. The response of the Portfolio Holder for Leisure Service and Healthy Living is set out below:

Question

“Agreeing final measures for Newtown Live and Move project

The report to this committee on the above project states that “*The results [of the public consultation] are currently being analysed with a view to sharing with SMB and members before a proposal going to DCC HATOC in July 2025. The scheme is on track for delivery in September.*”

But Devon County Council are advertising the draft orders on April 3rd, with public consultation on them running to April 28th. In other words, it appears that decisions have already been taken about the measures ahead of any consideration of the public consultation results or input from SMB or ward Councillors.

Can the Portfolio Holder confirm explain how this has happened and what he suggests happens to reconcile what DCC and ECC are doing?”

Response

Councillor Wood stated that at the joint Devon County Council and Exeter City Council Members Briefing on 15 October it was proposed and agreed that the

scheme would progress to consultation and there would be two elements to this, the survey and public engagement events and the formal Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) consultation. It was the understanding at that time that both elements would take place concurrently to form the complete consultation for onward analysis, proposals and decision making. Operationally, the two elements had to run back-to-back. The advertising of the formal TRO consultation did not preclude further advertisements or adjustments but without taking this forward, it would have required a further decision gateway. The TRO consultation was part of the proposal and decision making which was required to be considered for this scheme to be delivered.

The work was underway to present findings of the public engagement and would also summarise the TRO consultation during May. This would enable decisions to be proposed and made through the ECC SMB and DCC HATOC decision-making processes to enable the scheme to progress to construction in the autumn.

In a supplementary question Councillor Wetenhall asked if the Portfolio Holder could confirm detail of when SMB, ward Members and the Portfolio Holder would see, discuss and approve this. Councillor Wood responded stating that it would be good to deliver this as there had been previous consultations and that the officer would present to scrutiny today and would likely include an answer.

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20, the following question was submitted by Councillor Moore in relation to the Portfolio of Councillor Wood who attended the meeting. The question was circulated at the meeting to Members of the Committee. The response of the Portfolio Holder for Leisure Services and Healthy Living is set out below:

Question

“Please can the following figures be presented to the scrutiny committee in relation to Northbrook Pool.

Cost of planned and responsive maintenance requirements for the next three years.
Expenditure, Maintenance Costs & Projected Increase in Future Repairs”

Response

Councillor Wood stated that looking back over the last three years, maintenance costs were £66,845, approximately £22,000 per annum. Looking forward, after considering the financial sustainability and consultation report, if the Council decided to keep the pool open significant capital works would be required. These would include, works to improve sustainability, reducing energy use and carbon emissions at approximately £850,000. £700,000 would be required to bring the centre up to a reliable and efficient operational industry standard and approximately £450,000 cost to comply with accessibility requirements. Collectively these works would extensively update the building therefore the historic trend of £22,000 per annum maintenance costs may be reduced.

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20, the following question was submitted by Councillor Moore in relation to the Portfolio of Councillor Wood who attended the meeting. The question was circulated at the meeting to Members of the Committee. The response of the Portfolio Holder for Leisure Service and Healthy Living is set out below:

Question

“What costs would be incurred by the Council to cover its closure (redundancy, security while closed etc)”

Response

Cost for decommissioning Northbrook:

Pools - £1000

Gas and domestic water services - £1000

Electrics - £500

Trade waste - £750

Boarding up of reception and office windows - £260

Total = £3510

Staff relocation would be considered following the usual process.

In a supplementary question Councillor Moore asked if these costs had been shared with the community and any interested community groups and whether funding from government had been considered. In response Councillor Wood stated that this information would be included in the minutes of this meeting and swimming pools fund had been approached twice but a commitment to remain open for 15 years was necessary, which was not possible at the time.

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20, the following question was submitted by Councillor Moore in relation to the Portfolio of Councillor Wood who attended the meeting. The question was circulated at the meeting to Members of the Committee. The response of the Portfolio Holder for Leisure Service and Healthy Living is set out below:

Question

“What advice from Sport England or others has been sought to improve viability?”

Answer

In July 2023, Stage 1 of Sport England Swimming Pool Fund bid of £91,193 was requested to support with the prevention of closure due to rising utility costs which was unsuccessful.

In October 2023, Stage 2 of Sport England Swimming Pool Fund bid of £894,400 was requested to support with the installation of PV panels, LED lighting, replace the gas boiler, triple glaze the pool hall, wall upgrade and repair roof and roof lights which was unsuccessful due to 15-year commitment to keep the building open.

In a supplementary question Councillor Moore asked why consultation with the community was only happening now and not two years ago, after the budget decision had been made. Councillor Wood responded that there was a potential decision to be made to make significant savings across the council and so consultation on the impact on users and the community was required at this point. There wasn't an intention to close the pool until the building of this budget. No community group had approached the Council formally and the building belonged to the Northbrook Trust so any group wishing to take it on would need to consider all implications of doing so.

Questions to the Portfolio Holder for Leisure Services and Healthy Living

Councillor Palmer asked if the pool were to close could the Portfolio Holder give reassurance that schools which use the pool for swimming lessons would not be disadvantaged and that costs wouldn't increase.

Councillor Wood responded stating that it would be Council who made any decision and schools had been approached. The consultation was available online and paper-based and over 200 hundred responses had been received to date. The consultation was formal, appropriate and in-depth and it would be wrong to predict the results which would inform decision making.

Councillor Atkinson asked how many political parties had responded with an alternative solution and what services funds would come from to enable this.

Councillor Wood responded stating that no plans had been received from any group, political or otherwise and the centre was operating at a loss of £220,000 per year.

Councillor Mitchell stated that the alternative budget proposed no cuts in leisure.

65 **Portfolio Holder report - Portfolio Holder for Leisure Services & Healthy Living (Councillor Wood)**

Councillor Wood presented his report which was taken as read and highlighted that the dashboard showed key indicators of how the service was performing.

The Portfolio Holder responded to questions from Members in the following terms:

- the intention was to approach leisure being cost-neutral as it was a discretionary service;
- the enhanced model for Wellbeing Exeter did not necessarily mean additional wards, it could include communities of interest which may not be geographical as was the case with the current enhanced provision;
- the work of the Wellbeing Exeter project was effective with the core model focussed on communities in the greatest need and some not traditionally viewed as in need but disrupted by development. The biggest impact was new communities and those who struggle to engage in a new area. Inclusive Exeter had already carried out some work including with a BAME community in Pinhoe and it may be possible to negotiate with some developers to contribute to Wellbeing Exeter;
- officers were working closely with Sport England with regard to the package of funding required as Sport England were not able to fully fund projects. The process was not one of application and decision-making but rather a negotiated process;
- NHS staff were present during referral sessions and most were paid for by the NHS and evaluation was carried out across the country with the local service almost breaking even. Anecdotal feedback was positive with one volunteer having been through the sessions and reporting that this had helped their recovery, gave them confidence in their body again and so they became a leisure member and volunteer. Formal evaluation would be undertaken by the NHS;
- governance models for the Wonford centre were being considered and a written answer would be provided outside the committee with regard to how a decision would be made about governance; and
- work was being undertaken with a partner regarding Exeter Arena and this was different to Northbrook pool as the Arena was a Grade B facility of national standard. How to run the Arena in a more cost-effective way was being investigated with the support of a partner and there was no indication of closure.

Councillor Hughes withdrew their question following comment by the Chair.

66 **Portfolio Holder Report - Portfolio Holder for Arts, Culture & Tourism (Councillor Foale)**

Councillor Foale presented the report on his Portfolio for Arts, Culture and Tourism highlighting the following:

- it had been a pleasure to have the chance to work with the creative and dynamic people of Exeter and to build positive relationships with over five National Portfolio Organisations (NPO);
- a celebration had been held at the Barnfield Theatre;
- there was a plan in conjunction with Exeter Partnership; and
- there had been a dig event in Princesshay with the RAMM.

The Portfolio Holder and Strategic Director for Place responded to questions from Members in the following terms:

- different models of governance would be investigated by the consultant;
- it would be an excellent idea for other service areas to replicate the supported placements scheme which the RAMM had successfully implemented;
- it was of note that the RAMM reached out to special schools and other vulnerable young people;
- there was a plan for a review of cultural services and subsequent restructure within which learning would be shared from the leisure review. An example was given of the café from St Sidwell's Point now being open in the RAMM;
- the draft cultural strategy had been updated;
- all five NPO were keen to repeat the celebration evening annually; and
- ensuring that transport options were clear on the Visit Exeter site could be looked in to.

67 **Live and Move Programme Update**

The Place Partnership Manager presented the report of the Live and Move Programme Update and gave a presentation making the following points:

- that there was a new element in tracking what facilities were used;
- residents said that Valley Parks and playing fields were most popular as opposed to indoor activities;
- it was easier to obtain information from those using indoor facilities; and
- Newtown update had been added to support.

The Place Partnership Manager and the Strategic Director for Place responded to Members questions in the following terms:

- he was unsure of the exact questions asked about gender but would investigate and provide details outside the meeting;
- gender inequality hadn't been a focus in the past but rather ethnic diversity. He was willing to work with Members and colleagues to gain insight into what could be done in future;
- Ebrington Road remained a focus along with Merrivale, Redhills and Exwick;
- It was exciting that This Girl Can campaign had been brought to the city as well as the Women's Rugby World Cup and the programme would celebrate all that was available in the area;
- access to Valley Parks was constantly being looked at and there may be opportunities with the Water Lane development. There was a desire to improve routes and access to get people safely and sustainably into the Valley Park;
- the dashboard was available publicly and there was a local community of practice held quarterly and shared through Exeter Partnership. The information gathered would be used in future funding bids;
- Exeter was known nationally for best practice in utilising this data which was also given to Sport England to share and had been featured a number of times in place-based newsletters with case studies and learning also on the website;

- the language was complicated regarding reduction in inactivity but this was part of a national survey used for benchmarking;
- there were qualitative reports which could be shared;
- there was data regarding the barriers to walking and cycling which could be shared;
- much of the programme's work with those with disabilities was one-to-one rather than groups. Recommendations from Members of groups to speak to, such as the suggested Pelican Project, would be welcome and it would be possible to investigate what else could be done;
- individuals could be referred to Wellbeing Exeter; and
- Sport England did not include heavy housework as activity but people were asked about things which raised their heartrate, so residents may have included this; and
- the Chief Medical Officer had a view on what was and was not included in the activity list.

Following a vote the report on the Live and Move Programme Update was noted.

68 **Forward Plan of Business and Scrutiny Work Plan**

The Chair stated that there had been one request for scrutiny under Standing Order No. 18 from Councillors Mitchell, Jobson and Moore which had followed a discussion at Chair's Briefing and the Chair having made contact with the Chief Executive and Leader. There was also one item allocated to the committee via the Scrutiny Programme Board.

Councillor Mitchell presented the request that the Strategic Scrutiny Committee consider in conjunction with the Council Leader and the Chief Executive, an appropriate date for the committee to consider the Final Business Case regarding Exeter City Councils submission to government in respect of Local Government Reorganisation.

Councillor Mitchell explained that they understood that there was a lot of work to be done and they did not wish to hinder that but wanted to ensure that all parties remained involved and supported the case when it came to Executive and Council in a united fashion.

Councillor Moore seconded the proposal.

Members spoke in favour making the following points:

- that the Leader and Chief Executive could expand on their work and seek the support of the committee;
- Devon County Council and other leaders could be invited to hear the Council's thinking;
- this would be a formal process to reassure residents;
- scrutiny was an important element;
- it was unknown how many other submissions would include Exeter and whether they would have been scrutinised therefore scrutiny could strengthen the Council's case;
- it was important to note that scrutiny in public would show accountability and residents would be pleased that Members were talking to one another and in agreement; and
- there was concern that the county council proposal may be successful.

Members spoke against the proposal making the following points:

- they were not sure that value could be added or what could be achieved as they would work with their group leader; and
- report deadlines for scrutiny could potentially hinder progress.

The Strategic Director for Place made the following points:

- the Strategic Management Board(SMB) were committed to cross-party engagement as the full business case was developed;
- there would be detailed discussions between SMB and each group leader forming active work to develop the final case;
- there would be consultation and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders;
- there would be a public consultation and engagement process;
- there were six aspects, to which the Leader had alluded, and a number were beyond the knowledge of the Council therefore specialist consultants would be required to develop the case; and
- that it could be helpful for scrutiny to look at the proposals of other Councils, especially those which included the city council boundaries.

The Chair invited Councillor Bialyk, the Leader, who was present, to speak on the matter. The Leader made the following points:

- he understood that this was a major issue and he wanted to get it right;
- there was an aspiration to be unitary;
- there was size and geography to work through;
- there were six areas to be covered;
- Members would have input into the submission;
- that he wanted to work with opposition leaders and independent Members as well as his own group;
- much detail would come after the 28 November submission;
- information would be shared as and when it could be and questions would be answered; and
- he would look at the timetable with the Chief Executive and meet with Leaders before 21 November.

The Chair read the response she had received from the Chief Executive stating that due process for determining items on the scrutiny work programme be followed.

The Monitoring Officer explained that the Chief Executive was unable to attend this meeting and acknowledged that she ought to be consulted.

Councillor Atkinson proposed an amendment in the following terms:

“to defer the decision to consider the matter until the next scrutiny meeting in order to seek the views of the Chief Executive in discussion with party leaders including independents” and following a vote was NOT CARRIED.

Following a vote on the substantive proposal was NOT CARRIED.

The Chair explained that there had been an item regarding Stagecoach which had previously been allocated to Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee and following the Scrutiny Programme Board had now been allocated to this committee. The Chair stated that during discussion at Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee it had been suggested that the Portfolio Holder report on the information shared by Stagecoach and Devon County Council at Exeter Transport Member Working Group.

During discussion a Member asked that the scope of this proposal be expanded as currently it stated difficulties with the 'P' route. The Chair stated that this could be determined at the scoping stage.

Following a unanimous vote it was **AGREED** that this item be added to the work plan.

Councillor Moore raised that an item on Citywide action on Climate Change had fallen off the work plan agenda and it was agreed that Democratic Services would investigate and the Chair would work with Councillor Moore on this issue. The Chair agreed to update the committee, via email, the outcome of discussions with officers.

Following a vote the plan, as amended, was **AGREED**.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.40 pm

Chair