

EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

Thursday 18 September 2025

Present:-

The Right Worshipful the Lord Mayor Councillor Anne Jobson (Lord Mayor)
Councillor Gemma Rolstone (Deputy Lord Mayor)
Councillors Asvachin, Banyard, Begley, Bialyk, Cookson, Darling, Foale, Fullam, Haigh, Harding, Holland, Hughes, Hussain, Ketchin, Knott, Mitchell, K, Mitchell, M, Moore, Palmer, Parkhouse, Payne, Pole, Read, Rees, Snow, Vizard, Wardle, Wetenhall, Williams, R, Wood and Wright

Also Present

Chief Executive, Strategic Director for Corporate Resources, Legal Advisor, Head of Service - Commercial Assets, Democratic Services Manager and Democratic Services Officer

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest were made by Members.

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CIVIC CENTRE RELOCATION STRATEGY

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Bialyk, moved the recommendations set out in the report, seconded by Councillor Wright.

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources presented the report, and responded to Members questions alongside the Head of Service- Commercial Assets in the following terms:

- there would be a financial payback after three years;
- having a customer service centre was a key priority;
- a Unitary Authority would lead to an increase in numbers of staff, but they would be working in other buildings and hybrid working;
- it was not currently possible for Councillors to look around the ground floor of Senate Court, but a tour could be held in the future;
- Senate Court was significantly more fit-for-purpose than the Civic Centre and was significantly lower on greenhouse gasses;
- he would need to speak to the property team at Senate Court to know what the maintenance costs would be;
- the tenants in Phase One of the Civic Centre would not need compensation due to the nature of their tenancy agreements, excluding the Children's Centre;
- there had not yet been any discussion with developers regarding the future of the Civic Centre;
- relevant market information for the business rental market needed to be assembled for two to four years' time;
- the tenant needed a decision urgently to acquire alternative premises;
- this meeting was to seek approval for a budget to agree the compensation package;
- it would be challenging to bring forward the report due in November;
- Oakwood House and Belle Isle would remain;
- the tenant would be able to apply to the Court if a decision was not made quickly;

- wishes for unisex toilets would be given to the architect;
- Section 25 had been served on the tenant at the earliest opportunity to allow negotiation;
- the decision needed to be made now due to the landlord of the premises the tenant was proposing to move to;
- the debt outstanding for Senate Court was £7.7 million;
- the Civic Centre would remain useable until 2027-28 but it is likely a considerable amount of money would be spent on repairs;

The Section 151 officer, in responding to Councillor Moore's enquiry advised that the agreement with the Government regarding the funds was not a legal one, but would check prior to finalising the funds.

During the debate, Members made the following comments:

Councillor Hughes:

- there was a lot of uncertainty around the future unitary status;
- there had not been enough of a financial case presented;
- they could not see enough evidence that this money wasn't being used for the new council following Local Government Reorganisation (LGR);
- they felt cornered to make a decision without facts and finances; and
- they did not have enough evidence to be supportive.

Councillor Fullam:

- enquired on who had made the decision that the Guildhall was no longer feasible;
- it was not known what the next Local Authority would be and the new legacy council would have to move from the Civic Centre to Senate Court;
- had alternative options been looked at; and
- when the Guildhall had been deemed unfeasible it should have been brought back to council.

Councillor Read left the meeting.

Councillor Knott:

- highlighted the importance for Members to be mindful that they were not being asked to vote on moving to Senate Court;
- the Landlord and Tenants Act was specific, and the officers acted accordingly;
- if a decision was not made, the tenant could go to court, and the council would be stuck with a long lease with a low rate; and
- tonight's meeting was about the compensation for the tenant.

Councillor Palmer:

- welcomed Councillor Knott's clarification, which was considered to be clearer than the report and slides;
- she didn't feel that it had been made clear that that was why the Members were there; and
- if this had been made clear it would have been a more straightforward decision.

Councillor Pole:

- it did not make sense to operate a building in a prime city centre building;
- it made sense to allow officers to make decisions about these buildings; and
- it was a good idea to explore Senate Court as an option.

Councillor M Mitchell:

- given that the notice was served twelve months ago, what was the reason for the urgency;
- there was an assumption that in approving the recommendation to move in principle would mean that Senate Court would become the new Civic Centre;
- he was deeply concerned whether Members and Officers got this right; and
- he felt that Members should have been involved in this process.

Councillor Wood:

- this meeting was about the compensation the Council was legally required to pay to the tenant;
- he had agreed previously that the Civic Centre wasn't fit for purpose;
- he felt that when the proposal for unitary was decided on this would provide a decent base for the future council;
- the report focused on a new building being necessary, and Senate Court could be it; and
- if it was possible to work in there, it was important to make that happen.

Councillor Wetenhall:

- what would happen if nothing was done;
- it was not a suitable site for the new unitary authority;
- County Hall would be a good option for a unitary authority; and
- there were lots of alternatives, it was not just Senate Court.

Councillor K Mitchell:

- wanted the report in November to give clearer details;
- explained that whilst two separate issues, they were tied together as the money could only be used for regeneration; and
- what would happen if they voted for the recommendations tonight but voted against moving in November.

Councillor Holland:

- he trusted the judgement of officers and the Strategic Director of Corporate Resources;
- the presentations had been helpful;
- the Civic Centre was run down, and the costs would continue to rise to maintain it;
- the Civic Centre was also not the best place to run a council from;
- Senate Court was too small for a unitary and too big for a town council;
- this report supported the Exeter plan; and
- he would support the recommendations.

Councillor Vizard:

- understood the concerns that had been expressed;
- a council would be needed in Exeter, regardless of LGR;
- if an office move was not agreed, Senate Court would be an improved sellable or rentable asset;
- Members needed to make a decision now, if not it would not be possible to secure Senate Court for the future;
- information regarding why Guildhall was not an option needed to be brought forward;
- if Members did not agree, there would be loss of control of an asset, and loss of the ability to reduce running costs and work towards Net Zero; and

- Members needed to look at the bigger picture and the opportunity this would create.

Councillor Moore:

- agreed that money was linked to the move;
- Members had not been presented with a range of options;
- council staff would not benefit from this move because the council would no longer exist when it came time to move buildings;
- an assumption was being made that the council needed to be all on one site;
- residents would find it more difficult to get to Senate Court; and
- she felt that the surplus money that was being proposed for refurbishment could be used for better regeneration.

Councillor Parkhouse:

- clarified that the recommendation to move was in principle; and
- the vote at Executive in October 2024 was to look into alternative premises and had not specified that it must be the Guildhall.

Councillor Wright as seconder, made the following comments in support of the recommendations:

- felt Councillor Parkhouse's clarification had been beneficial;
- this had not come out of the blue, and was part of the work that was agreed in October 2024;
- it would have been easier to make a decision had Members been included earlier;
- she was supportive in principle;
- it was short sighted to say that none of the Members or officers would be there when it was time to move buildings;
- there were lots of reasons it was needed to move out of the Civic Centre; and
- there was a legal obligation to provide this compensation.

Councillor Foale:

- was reluctantly supporting the move to Senate Court;
- the report had raised more questions that is answered; and
- thanked Councillor Knott for his explanation.

In summing up, the Leader, Councillor Bialyk, made the following comments:

- this was a serious matter;
- nothing had happened behind closed doors, decisions about the Guildhall had been made under delegated authority of the Directors;
- Senate Court would provide a £7.7 million asset;
- Members needed ambition for Exeter and how they would work with the 49 parishes;
- issues surrounding accessibility at the Civic Centre would be much improved at Senate Court;
- County Hall was a listed building with a number of issues;
- Senate Court made sense;
- it was not sensible to stay in the Civic Centre and the building was no longer appropriate;
- vacating the Civic Centre would enable much needed rentable housing in the city centre;
- by removing the tenants from Senate Court, the council would have an asset on their hands, regardless of future use, but this would not be possible with a secure tenant in the building;

- councils had to move quickly and be dynamic sometimes;
- he wanted Exeter to be a dynamic, expanding city with sustainable growth;
- it had been made clear that this was a decision in principle; and
- following LGR the people that ran the council would need to have a vision.

Following a vote the recommendations were CARRIED.

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 8.15 pm)

Chair