

EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

Tuesday 10 February 2026

Present:-

The Right Worshipful the Lord Mayor Councillor Jobson (Chair)
Councillor Rolstone (Deputy Lord Mayor).
Councillors Asvachin, Atkinson, Banyard, Begley, Bennett, Bialyk, Cookson, Darling, Foale, Fullam, Haigh, Harding, Holland, Hughes, Hussain, Ketchin, Knott, Miller-Boam, Mitchell, K, Mitchell, M, Moore, Palmer, Patrick, Payne, Pole, Read, Sheridan, Snow, Vizard, Wardle, Wetenhall, Williams, M, Williams, R, Wood and Wright

Also Present

Chief Executive, Strategic Director for Corporate Resources, Strategic Director of Operations, Head of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer, Head of Service - Environment and Waste, Head of Service - Commercial Assets, Democratic Services Manager, and Democratic Services Officer.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 - EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

The Lord Mayor advised that there were no part 2 items on the agenda.

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USE OF CITY COUNCIL ASSETS TO DRIVE REGENERATION

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Bialyk, moved the recommendations, seconded by Councillor Wright, and invited the Strategic Director of Operations, Strategic Director of Corporate Resources, and the Head of Service – Environment and Waste to present the report.

The Strategic Director of Operations and the Head of Service – Environment and Waste presented the portion of the report on the Materials Reclamation Facility (MRF) making the following points:

- this supported all of the Councils' corporate policies;
- progress was required now, despite uncertainty surrounding Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)
- the current (MRF) was over 25 years old and required a full refurbishment;
- increase processing volume capacity was needed;
- frequent machinery downtime was causing financial loss;
- the existing site was small and lacked sufficient capacity;
- installation of update fire suppression measures was required;
- the layout of the current MRF was complex due to multiple services operating there;
- survey work indicated that a sewer line ran close to the railway, creating constraints;
- the Environment Agency requirements were increasingly challenging to meet, and South West Water required 3-meter clearance on each side of the sewer line, which impacted usable space;
- this project concerned the entirety of the Operations service;

- Belle Isle was outdated, with temporary facilities, compliance issues, and restricted space;
- the welfare facilities at Belle Isle were porta cabins and this proposal aimed to provide proper facilities for all Operations staff;
- there were concerns around the safety and security of machinery at the current site;
- this proposal sought the acquisition of the Envirohub site near the current MRF;
- the Envirohub was close to the Devon County Council recycling area, the weighbridge sites, and the ARC building, which increased the strategic value;
- moving to operations to the Envirohub would allow work to continue without disruption;
- an update assessment of the cost of refurbishment was £13,586,000, whereas moving to the Envirohub would cost £12,871,000;
- the Envirohub had an improved EPC rating and had capacity for additional solar panels; and
- there was office space available for approximately 50 members of staff, with room for the frontline teams, training facilities, and significantly improved toilet and shower facilities.

The Strategic Director of Operations and the Head of Service – Environment and Waste responded to Members' questions on the new MRF in the following terms;

- the building was fully accessible and had passenger lifts;
- they were open minded for making improvements, and would look at it subject to agreement from Members;
- the Environment Agency feedback had been noted, and a report would be brought before Members regarding Belle Isle;
- increased facilities would decrease levels of rejected waste and secondary processing;
- a big challenge for increasing the recycling rate was changing behaviour, however there had been an improvement following better education and engagement surrounding food waste recycling;
- the existing permit was larger than needed, included mixed waste, and could be transferred easily;
- the focus had been focused largely on capacity in Exeter;
- they were confident that it would be possible to do two collection policies if it was needed after LGR;
- the building layout would be different, but the machinery would be the same;
- they were not yet at the point of purchase yet so it is possible the figures could change, however an external party had also been used to develop the figures;
- it would cost an estimated £2.5 million to resolve the issues at Belle Isle;
- the building had become available following the sale of the business that was previously working within the premises;
- the solar farm was not currently being used at full capacity, there were 11 electric vehicles, but it was not necessary to have a charger for each vehicle;
- Members would be offered the chance to visit the existing MRF;
- a secure tariff would be sought to ensure income on an annual basis;
- there would not be the capability for a textile collection service and this was not currently required as a district council, but this would need to be considered following LGR;
- £7.7 million had been approved for existing project but they were seeking to add £2.5 million for Belle Isle and £2.6 million from CIL funding;

- the cost had increased as there were greater levels of contamination that anticipated and the railway tracked was causing restrictions;
- technology was changing all the time, so it was difficult to predict future capacity;
- the figure for the renovation of the existing MRF and the figure for moving to the Envirohub was the same;
- the customers of Devon Contract Waste were now with a well-known national firm; and
- it was believed to be a 12 month programme if approved, the Council had been working with a consultant so it would be possible to move quickly.

The Strategic Director of Corporate Resources presented the portion of the report on Senate Court, making the following points:

- this had previously been discussed in September;
- the civic centre was old and needed repairs with an estimated cost of £5 million;
- this move would help to deliver part of the Liveable Exeter program and was in line with the local plan for housing;
- Senate Court was the most financially viable option, as the building was already owned by the Council;
- the report sought delegated authority for the Chief Executive for the final decision regarding the layout;
- the staff would be engaged with to understand what worked best for them and their service;
- moving to Senate Court would save the Council £164,000 a year moving forward, with an estimated benefit of £868,000 over ten years;
- there were significant environmental benefits, with an expected change of EPC rating to B;
- Senate Court was much more accessible, with two lifts and accessible toilets;
- the committee rooms would be much larger and could accommodate up to 70 members of the public;
- there would be secure bicycle storage in the basement; and
- it would be possible to install focus areas for working, and pods to enable private conversations.

The Strategic Director of Corporate Resources responded to Members' questions in the following terms:

- when looking at unitary authorities such as Plymouth, it was believed Senate Court would be a suitable size;
- the cost plan assumed an EPC B rating, to achieve EPC A further repairs and refurbishment would be needed;
- the travel to work plan was not part of this report but was being reviewed by Human Resources (HR);
- it was intended for the cycle storage to be secure;
- additional costing for unisex toilets on each floor was approximately £375,000;
- if the decision was delayed for 6 months the move date would be closer to Christmas 2027 and the Council would have to pay a holding cost for the empty building;
- there had been plans to move for a number of years, this was being done now as the building had become vacant;
- the Civic Centre would be sold by the new unitary authority;
- it was likely that a city centre location would be desirable for the new authority;

- there was a holding cost for Senate Court at the moment, but this was built into the cost moving forward;
- Senate Court was entirely electric, 25% from solar panels and the remainder from the grid;
- the implementation program needed to be updated;
- County Hall had not been considered due to the location and the size, the future authority was likely smaller than the existing Devon County Council, and would need to be easily accessible for residents;
- it was not envisaged that Senate Court would hold full council meetings;
- there was £3 million available from the Guildhall budget;
- the Council did not own the adjacent The Senate, only Senate Court;
- welfare facilities had been considered and were reflected in the drawings; and
- it was not yet known what would happen to assets owned by existing councils following LGR.

Meeting paused 19:30, resumed 19:40.

During debate, Councillor M Mitchell, as leader of the Liberal Democrat group, made the following points:

- the outcome of the LGR proposal would be known in 17 weeks;
- concerned for the duality of services offered by other authorities;
- he was satisfied that there would be an appropriate transition period;
- moving the MRF was a risk worth taking irrespective of LGR;
- the outcome of LGR would change the need for a new civic centre;
- the Minister could decide a different outcome to what was proposed; and
- he did not know what the rush was to move to Senate Court.

Councillor Moore, as leader of the Green group, made the following points;

- it was important that this decision was transparent;
- moving the MRF provided a real opportunity to improve the recycling rate;
- she would be supporting the move of the MRF;
- deferring or delaying the decision to move the Council to Senate Court would not increase the cost that much;
- she might support the move in a few months' time, but could not support it today;
- Belle Isle was based in the corner of Belle Isle park, and it had previously been determined that there was a high risk of flooding and that a housing development was not suitable; and
- what did the Leader envisage would happen to the existing Belle Isle site.

During debate, Members made the following points about the Materials Reclamation Facility (MRF):

- the biggest problem when making a new space was construction costs, buying a new building eliminated that issue;
- the emphasis was on staff facilities at the MRF, it would help to recruit and retain staff if the conditions were improved;
- a new MRF was essential and would solve issues with Belle Isle;
- this offered opportunities to bring staff together and could provide improved cross departmental working;
- the Operations staff did an outstanding job and a new MRF was exactly what they needed;
- the new authority would need recycling handling facilities within the city;
- moving the MRF delivers the improvements at a lower cost than refurbishment of the existing site;

- the capacity and working conditions of the MRF staff were significant;
- this proposal met the Council's climate change and net zero objectives;
- the figures for moving the MRF looked better than those for refurbishment, but they were an increase on the original figure of £8 million;
- moving the location of the MRF had been years in the making; and
- there would be learning and development space within the new building, which was pleasing to see.

During debate, Members made the following points about Senate Court:

- an estimated price of £375,000 for unisex toilets was dissatisfying and should be reconsidered by the Chief Executive;
- how could the Council plan for a future that they did not know about and could this leave the future authority with a financial burden;
- the meeting rooms should be big enough for the new authority;
- they were confident that following LGR a presence would be needed in the city centre for the new authority;
- County Hall was not practical for a number of reasons;
- delaying this decision would make it more expensive;
- there were lots of unknowns and that was uncomfortable;
- it was sensible to delay the decision by six months as there was little risk in doing so;
- moving to Senate Court met climate change and net zero objectives;
- officers had given clear reasons as to why this should be approved;
- residents would still need council services and it is unlikely that Exeter residents would be sent to other areas to deal with their issues;
- moving to Senate Court meant that residents would have access to accessible toilets when visiting the Council;
- the Civic Centre was not a healthy building to be in;
- the Civic Centre had poor accessibility and high CO2 emissions; and
- this was an opportunity to provide comfortable working conditions for all staff.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Bialyk, made the following points in summing up:

- he was sure that the Council would ensure that relevant legislation regarding gender neutral toilets would be complied with;
- this was about the dignity and welfare of staff, and that needed to be remembered;
- doing nothing was not the better option and was not the answer;
- this needed to be done and there was a greater risk if it was not done;
- there had been no proposal about Belle Isle in the recommendations;
- moving to Senate Court made sense;
- the shadow authority would decide where they would want to base themselves, what this Council needed to do was to put themselves in a good position for moving forward; and
- the figures made sense and he hoped both recommendations would have support.

Councillor Moore raised a point of order under Standing Order 10 (15) and provided clarity on her previous comments:

- she wanted to defer the decision, rather than not make one; and
- asked for clarification from the Leader surrounding a nature and feasibility study for Belle Isle.

The Lord Mayor advised that she would be taking two votes on the recommendations, one for the Materials Reclamation Facility, and another on Senate Court.

Following a unanimous vote, recommendations 2.1 – 2.6 were CARRIED.

Councillor M Mitchell, called for a roll call vote on recommendations 2.7 – 2.10, and a named vote was recorded as follows:

Voting For:

Councillors Asvachin, Atkinson, Begley, Bialyk, Cookson, Darling, Foale, Harding, Hussain, Knott, Miller-Boam, Patrick, Pole, Rolstone, Snow, Vizard, Wardle, Williams M, Williams R, Wood, and Wright (21 Members).

Voting Against:

Councillors Banyard, Bennett, Fullam, Haigh, Ketchin, K Mitchell, M Mitchell, Moore, Palmer, Payne, Read, Sheridan, and Wetenhall (13 Members).

Abstentions:

Councillors Holland and The Lord Mayor Councillor Jobson (2 Members).

Absent:

Councillors Hughes, Rees, and Parkhouse (3 Members).

Following a vote, recommendations 2.7 – 2.10 were CARRIED.

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 8.46 pm)

Chair