

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

3 July 2025

Present:

Councillor Catherine Rees (Chair)

Councillors Cookson, Begley, Darling, Fullam, Holland, Hussain, Moore, Parkhouse, Payne, Pole, Read and Snow

Apologies:

Councillor Wardle

Also present:

Strategic Director for Place, Strategic Director for Corporate Resources, Planning Solicitor, Head of Service Operations, Head of Service - City Centre and Net Zero, Head of Service - Finance and Democratic Services Officer

In attendance as Portfolio Holder:

Councillors Asvachin, Vizard and Williams R.

64 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 30 January 2025 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

65 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

66 Questions from the Public under Standing Order No. 19

There were no questions from members of the public.

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

There were no questions submitted in advance from Members.

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20 the following questions were asked of Portfolio Holders who were present.

Councillor Read asked the Portfolio Holder for City Management what action could be taken with regard to green algae which was not dangerous to dogs but could distress fish. Councillor Ruth Williams responded stating that the public could be reassured and it would be for the Environment Agency to undertake any mitigation.

In a supplementary question Councillor Read asked if the Portfolio Holder would push the Environment Agency as their response showed that they did not intend to take any action. The Portfolio Holder requested sight of the response from the Environment Agency.

Councillor Parkhouse asked the Portfolio Holder for City Management if there had been any challenges with the roll out of food waste collections particularly in more densely populated areas and HMOs. Councillor R Williams responded stating that the roll out was going well with over 50% of homes now having a food waste collection. It had been identified that annual dissemination of information regarding

collections would be needed to areas such as those with a student population or a higher turnover of residents and that some blocks of flats may require alternative solutions.

The Chair asked if it would be helpful for information to be shared in community groups which Members may be involved in and Councillor R Williams responded that it would and that food and garden waste collections were earlier than refuse and recycling collections and that fluorescent stickers had been provided for food waste bins to make them more visible. She also stated that crews would come back if a food waste bin was missed and that this could be reported immediately it was missed, there was no need to wait until the end of the day. Finally, the Portfolio Holder suggested that residents are encouraged to follow Denis the Dustcart for further tips but stressed that vape batteries must not be put in bins given a recent fire in a waste lorry within the city.

Councillor Moore asked the Portfolio Holder for City Management whether the food waste roll-out would be complete this year and Councillor Ruth Williams responded that the planned end was 2025/26 but it may be that this would stretch into 2026/27.

Councillor Moore asked the Portfolio Holder for City Management what preparation was taking place for doorstep glass collection roll-out and Councillor Ruth Williams responded that there were no plans at present as there was not funding. She added that were there to be funding for extra crews and vehicles then this would be considered and that current arrangements were doing well compared to other Devon districts and black bin comparisons were comparable to others who had doorstep glass collection.

Councillor Read asked the Portfolio Holder for Climate, Ecological Change and Communities about the wording being provided to Gatherwell regarding Exeter Community Lottery. Councillor Vizard, as Portfolio Holder stated that the wording had been agreed but invited Councillor Read to send concerns to him and he would follow up.

Councillor Moore asked the Portfolio Holder for Climate, Ecological Change and Communities if the wording regarding the Community Lottery could be changed in council press releases and the Portfolio Holder responded that he would look into this but that the wording was in line with national policy and that he did not wish to over-complicate the message.

The Chair asked the Portfolio Holder for Climate, Ecological Change and Communities if there was a way in which amendments to the council website could be more agile and the Portfolio Holder responded that there was a link to the Council website from the Gatherwell and the agreed wording would apply to both but some timescales were beyond the Council's control.

68 Petition: Eton Walk Refuse bin (reinstatement)

The Chair announced that there had been a development and that the report regarding this item had been withdrawn. The petitioner had been invited to the meeting but had not responded.

69 Anti-Social Behaviour in the City Centre

The Chair announced that the guests expected were not present due to a discussion at Chair's Briefing where it was realised that this was a wide topic and should be

given sufficient attention to gain a holistic picture and deserved more time and organisation to obtain the correct evidence.

The Head of Service - City Centre and Net Zero gave a short presentation making the following points:

- that this was a challenging and complex area;
- the High Sherriff had convened a meeting which was due to discuss the same topic including impact on the business community and Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations;
- the Strategic Director for Place was now the Chair of the Community Safety Partnership which had an annual action plan which was beginning now and did not coincide with this meeting; and
- not all types of ASB had an impact on the city centre and consideration should be given to which to focus and therefore who should be invited.

During discussion Members made the following points:

- representation from people whose voices may not be heard as readily would be desirable with suggestions such as supporters of the football club, mosque and young people; and
- inviting wider representation was welcomed and suggestions made of Inclusive Exeter, Intercom Trust and Co-lab.

Councillor Michael Mitchell was invited to the table as proposer of the item and made the following points:

- the item had been scoped at Scrutiny Programme Board and he had spoken to outside bodies who were keen to give evidence;
- this began with a resident who had spoken to Councillor Palmer following him and his daughter having suffered a knife attack;
- other reports from residents of anti-social behaviour in the city centre and the impact on vulnerable people were detailed; and
- it was unacceptable for a small group of people to cause such issues and an initial meeting was needed to consider the causes and possible solutions.

The Strategic Director for Place explained that ASB was one of five priorities of the Community Safety Partnership, which was a multi-agency, statutory partnership. A sub-group of the partnership and chaired by InExeter was reviewing and coordinating work undertaken by partners and a report would be brought in September, as part of the call for evidence.

Discussion took place upon which organisations should be invited to the September meeting in order to give evidence and consensus that this may not be a topic for a singular meeting. The possibility of scrutiny being a public space for people to come together to hear the public and community perception as well as what businesses and agencies are doing to combat ASB.

Examples of ASB in a number of wards were given by Members and discussion regarding crime logging and evidence thresholds took place with some positive outcomes cited as well as the need for education and communication to residents.

Councillor Payne shared his knowledge of the Councillor Advocate Scheme, information regarding which can be found here: <https://devonandcornwall-pcc.gov.uk/councillor-advocate-scheme>

The Chair noted that full representation was needed and listed the following groups for inclusion on an invitation list for the September meeting:

- Inclusive Exeter;
- young people (perhaps Exeter College);
- Intercom Trust LGBTQ+ community;
- Mosque;
- Co-lab;
- Safer Exeter (Exeter Community Safety Partnership);
- University of Exeter;
- St Petrock's;
- Devon & Cornwall Police
- Exeter Football Club
- Taxi driver representative; and
- Together Devon (Drug and alcohol services).

The Chair clarified that it was important to have the opportunity to hear from those who had not contributed through the CSP and directly from the community.

The Chair explained that there appeared to be two proposals, firstly that CSP and police were invited to the next meeting and secondly that the CSP plus the above list of people were invited.

Councillor Hussain stated that the mosque was not represented on the CSP and would need to be contacted directly.

Councillor Parkhouse proposed, seconded by Councillor Darling that CSP and Police be invited to the September meeting to present on ASB.

The Chair proposed an amendment to the proposal, "that the CSP and Police are invited in September and in addition – Inclusive Exeter, Exeter College (young people), Intercom Trust, Together Devon (Drug and Alcohol Service), taxi representative, Football Club and mosque representatives", which following a vote was carried.

A vote on the motion as amended was CARRIED unanimously.

The Chair explained that each attendee would be asked to present for up to five minutes on the two questions set out in the March minutes: ASB in the city centre, its causes and possible solutions.

70 **Quarter 4 Budget Scrutiny**

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources presented the report making the following points:

- all documents provided had been considered by Full Council and this was an opportunity to ask questions to better understand the financial position;
- he was currently conducting a review of how financial information was presented to Members and endeavouring to make it more user-friendly especially at the end of the year; and
- any underspend at the end of the year can be caused by late funding from government and there was a will to make the true position for each service more understandable.

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

- he would ask the museum service for performance data to give a fuller answer but the previous café owner had given notice and a trial was being undertaken with the team who run the café at St Sidwell's Point and there was a small budget for this;
- the St Sidwell's Point café staff were council employees;
- £1.1 million of the required £1.4 million had been delivered and this was the purpose of carrying reserves, to support and protect the Council should all savings not be made;
- budget savings can prove to be challenging and setting income targets was a projection and may run short as it involved a range of assumptions and central government sometimes made changes;
- a best estimate was £5.7 million savings required over the next three years;
- Government was committed to business rate reset and this was the single reason for the required reductions;
- there were some issues of staff shortage making some projects difficult to deliver and Members could ask any Head of Service why projects which had been signed off were not being delivered;
- it may have helped if the business rate retention scheme had been reset in 2018;
- some council's had found this useful in balancing changes in government grants;
- the council did not respond to the consultation but have commissioned some indicative work;
- there were pockets of deprivation but compared to other areas in the country Exeter did not score highly for deprivation;
- with Local Government reorganisation the Guildhall would no longer be suitable for office relocation and options were being considered and would be taken back to full Council at the appropriate time;
- the idea had been to fund works from the Guildhall shopping centre surplus in order to free the Civic Centre for housing;
- there was an assessment of the number of people who don't live in the city but travel in which used a formula to calculate how much funding was received;
- an amount was being paid to fund the backdated pension deficit;
- pension valuation was being undertaken and there was an improved position;
- the valuation was designed to meet an accounting standard which was calculated differently to a triennial valuation;
- it was very difficult to project pension contributions but there was a three-year agreed amount and above this the tendency was to increase slightly each year;
- information would be provided by Devon County Council as they administered local pension;
- last year Strata's pension fund broke-even and Exeter's was into the 90 percents from an accounting point of view;
- there were different types of debt and income generated through a range of sources but some debts could be quite old but would be chased if tenant was in situ as arrears and would become debt when the tenancy was ended;
- there were two processes which would be followed for debt depending on whether the tenant was existing or previous;
- there were vacancies in some areas and one was the central sundry debt team but work on resolving this was being undertaken;
- a range of techniques were used to recover debt with three areas where write-off was sought – uneconomical, low value debt, if a company or individual was declared bankrupt, had a debt order or Individual Voluntary Arrangement where

there was no means to recover the debt or where all avenues had been exhausted;

- the write-off process would depend upon the value of the debt but would always involve the Strategic Director and on occasion the Portfolio Holder where the value of the debt required;
- earmarked reserves titled Sure Start remained due to funds having been provided by Sure Start in 2005 to provide a play area and must be kept forever in order to provide interest for maintenance and stood at around £20,000;
- he would take back to the service the questions of what the difficulties in appointing a project manager and the ensuing delays in leisure enhancements and what measures were being taken;
- he would also ask the service to respond regarding which initiatives had not begun utilising CIL funds;
- Wellbeing Exeter was funded through CIL Neighbourhood funding and was reliant on the amount of CIL collected and delays to developments could cause challenges;
- there was a plan to alleviate and support temporary accommodation which related to the General Fund and a particular length of lease was required for the maximum housing benefit subsidy and this had to sit within the HRA;
- the risk that rental income wouldn't be sufficient had been considered but deemed a low risk in respect of these properties;
- HRA was self-contained and funds would need to be found elsewhere in the budget, usually by scaling back the capital programme should the repayment not be met; and
- it would not be possible for earmarked reserves to be used for murals; this would usually come from annual maintenance budgets and the one for the play area was specific.

71 **Medium Term Financial Plan**

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources presented the report giving a presentation making the following points:

- business rate growth reduction was huge and there had been a projection in cash terms by an expert that ECC would get back to the same point by 2031;
- the starting point was the budget as approved in February;
- the end of the new homes' bonus had been confirmed;
- district councils would suffer more than other areas of local government as the positive income streams which proved beneficial were the ones which were going;
- a spending review had been confirmed including a council tax referendum as previously;
- council tax was increasing by a similar amount to other districts in the country;
- the housing benefit administration grant was reducing year on year as the transfer to Universal Credit took place and was managed by the Department for Work and Pensions(DWP);
- there was transitional relief where bills had increased but immediate benefit could be seen;
- inflation was calculated at a high level based on an estimated pay award of 3% but aware that two unions had rejected a 3.2% offer and were considering next steps;
- calculations went down slightly as it was estimated that the workforce would reduce slightly as budget cuts were made;
- 2025/26 reflected additional funds to reflect increased National Insurance contributions;

- inflation was not provided for all budgets but was for those which were critical;
- net interest was relatively stable and it was expected that there would continue to be a reduction in cash invested;
- the council was not looking to borrow externally at this time; and
- the key risk slide showed that the DWP were exploring pension age claimants being transferred to pension credit which could reduce the council's work leaving only challenging cases which would see a reduced grant but would be resource intensive meaning officers would be required.

72 **Box-shifting Update**

The report on Box-shifting was taken as read and Members were advised that the council complied with legislation and was waiting for central government to assess the impact and look at anti-avoidance regulations.

The Head of Service Finance responded to Members questions making the following points:

- the Business Rates Team carried out inspections of those box-shifting to ensure compliance with legislation; and
- from 1st April 2024 the Government extended the re-set period for empty property relief (EPR) from 6 weeks to 13 weeks and the impact on Exeter was broadly as forecast, with only a modest reduction in the level of EPR and no significant reduction in the number of businesses that show signs of practicing 'box shifting'.

Councillor Moore proposed a motion, seconded by Councillor Holland, that the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee request that the Executive Findings from this work are sent to government with a request that Local Authorities were given more powers when deciding when empty property rates relief can legitimately be granted.

The Councillor felt that it was a good idea to send feedback to government but not sure about giving powers to Local Authorities and proposed that the motion be amended.

In response to a Member's question, the following information was provided:

- the government planned to consult on anti-avoidance;
- the Welsh Government had concluded their consultation and proposals would take effect from April 2026;
- local powers may not be needed as banning the practice had been campaigned for nationally; and
- it was likely that the government would closely monitor what took place in Wales and may bring forward similar legislation.

Councillor Read and Councillor Moore accepted the amendment proposed by Councillor Pole and following a vote was unanimously CARRIED.

73 **Scrutiny Annual Report**

The Chair thanked Councillor Matthew Williams for attending and invited him, as Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Board to present the Annual Scrutiny Report.

Councillor Matthew Williams presented the report making the following points:

- he thanked the Democratic Services Officer for positive changes to the report and stated that this would continue to develop;
- the report had been brought in line with the municipal year; and
- he thanked members of the Scrutiny Programme Board, Councillors Parkhouse, Rees, Mitchell, M., and Pole for their work on the report.

During discussion Members made the following points:

- a reduction in property costs for Citizens Advice Exeter had been realised and could be listed as an impact;
- information presented to the public changed as a result of scrutiny of the community lottery could also be seen as an impact;
- outputs or outcomes might better represent what was currently listed under Impact;
- impact may not be seen within the timescale for an annual report;
- an updated Asset Management Policy had not yet been seen;
- there was a need to avoid acronyms.

The Chair moved and Councillor Cookson seconded the recommendation as set out in the report and following a vote was CARRIED unanimously.

74 **Scrutiny Work Plan and Proposals Received**

The Chair sought and gained the approval of the committee to move the two items scheduled for September to the January meeting given the importance of the Anti-Social Behaviour in the City Centre item.

During discussion it was agreed that Councillor's Wright and Vizard be asked to present their Portfolio Holder updates at the September meeting and Councillor Ruth Williams in March 2026.

Following a unanimous vote the draft Scrutiny Work Plan, as amended was **AGREED.**

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.56 pm

Chair