

## **Sidwell Street Workshop with Secondary School Students 22/09/25**

We asked young people 3 questions

- 1) What are your experiences of using Sidwell Street?
- 2) What could we do to improve Sidwell Street?
- 3) What would improve your experience of visiting Sidwell Street/City centre as a young person?

Responses

### **Q1 What are your experiences of using Sidwell street?**

#### **Safety**

All young people made similar comments that they avoided Sidwell Street if at all possible, some stated their parents would not allow them to go to Sidwell street,

All young people made similar comments that they felt unsafe, vulnerable, afraid, overwhelmed, frightened, scared, most said that they would not walk along Sidwell street alone. They felt that young people could be targeted as they were more vulnerable than adults

They stated that they felt that this was the situation at all times of the day but was noticeably worse at nighttime.

All young people noted that they were particularly concerned by the presence of street attached people – they noted that there were a lot of people who were clearly drunk, on drugs, in the street at all times of the day and night.

The young people stated they regularly saw this group of individuals acting violently – shouting, fighting, they had seen people taking drugs and drinking in the street, one reported they had seen one person overdose on drugs, they had witnessed people that were walking down the street talking to themselves.

They felt very intimidated by this group of people – worried about caught in the crossfire of a fight or being shouted at or being targeted by one of these individuals.

Young people were also concerned about high crime levels in the area – they were worried about their personal property – phones, wallets being stolen, they were aware of high levels of anti-social behaviour and shop lifting – they had seen people stealing from shops and running out of shops.

One young person reported that they heard people using racist and sexist language whilst in the area and this had made them feel very uncomfortable.

Many of the young people also noted that whilst they did not like the presence of street attached/homeless individuals due to the issues raised above they were really worried about them and wanted to better understand how those individuals were being supported – why were they sleeping in such a horrible place and was enough being done to help with drinking and drug taking?

## **Sidwell Street aesthetics**

Young people noted that Sidwell Street was not visually nice as an area – it felt glum and depressing, the buildings were run down and dirty looking. They said that there was very little green areas, no seating - the whole area looked neglected.

The pavements were cracked, there was a lot of rubbish on the floor, broken glass, a lack of bins and the bins located in the area were dirty and often full. They felt the area was smelly – often smell cannabis, and there is a strong smell of alcohol – the pavements often stained with spilt alcohol, cigarette butts are all over the pavements and people smoke/vape everywhere it's a horrible smell and really not nice when smoke is blown in your face. People also smoking outside cafes and bus stops made these places not nice to be around.

Lots of pigeons and seagulls around due to rubbish and food left on the floor from takeaways.

One person stated they had seen syringes on the floor near to the community centre.

## **Shops and facilities**

Lots of empty shop units and this made it look neglected

Too many vape shops – we should not be encouraging people to vape – too many young people are vaping

Too many fast food shops – this is not healthy, mess left outside them too.

Lack of shops to visit – nothing of real interest to young people – some said they went to the sweet shop at the bottom of Sidwell street but that was really the only place they wanted to go.

Young people felt the cafés on Sidwell street were not places they would visit – lots of people smoking outside and unless the issues of the drunk and violent individuals was resolved they would not want to visit them.

Lots of young people talked about the loss of a vintage games arcade called the Boneyard arcade which was just behind Sidwell Street and popular with young people as it was a safe place to hang out with friends and affordable – young people expressed frustration that this had been closed to build student housing - they felt there was too much student housing around Sidwell street and this did not help the overall character of the area – more shops and spaces were designed for university students and not for young people growing up in Exeter.

## **Particular hotspots highlighted:**

Odeon cinema – most of the young people avoided this and felt threatened walking past it due to the number of street attached people using the steps to sit on – they would not use the cinema for this reason. They thought it was a really unpleasant area – not a nice entrance, dirty and smelly.

The Duke of York – the pub was just seen as not a nice place to walk past – lots of people smoking outside and people shouting

St Sidwells Community Centre – the outside area – lots of street attached people congregate here, it can be very scary to walk past – lots of shouting and violent behaviour witnessed.

The wall and alleyway that leads up to the Co-lab – this was seen as being very intimidating – drunk people sitting on the wall smoking and shouting, beer cans and bottles lying around – the bin is often full, walking along the alleyway was not a nice experience

The bus stops – often buses are late or don't turn up, wait times for buses can be long, bus stops on Sidwell street are dirty – people sleep in them and street attached people sit and drink in them – smells of alcohol, cigarette smoke and butts all over the place. There is nowhere to go on Sidwell street to wait safely for a bus away from a bus stop, young people really did not enjoy the experience of waiting for a bus.

The covered area at the bottom of Sidwell Street – this was seen as a particular hotspot for trouble – due to the fact that it is covered and people often sleep there or sit and drink there all day, lots of people smoking here and it's also a bottleneck and can get crowded – people waiting for buses, shoppers, football crowd, university students. It can be very intimidating – this is also where many bus stops are located and as above the young people felt that waiting at the bus stops was not a nice experience.

### **Policing**

Almost all the young people felt that there were not enough police in Sidwell Street and that they would not know who to ask for help if something happened whilst they were walking through, when asked how often they could recall seeing police presence all responded very infrequently and almost never – one stated they had seen police recently but closer to the football ground on a match day.

### **Other issues raised**

Not just the street attached people that can cause problems – often busy with football fans – sometimes they can be very rowdy. University students – can be drunk, very loud and noisy and they also leave litter – bottles and cans and take away wrappers everywhere.

Some people raised concerns about local car parks – they even felt unsafe at having to walk through carparks in the local area as they thought they were really horrible.

The whole area feels chaotic – its busy, noisy, lots of buses and cyclists going very fast, it can feel very overwhelming – where the covered area is it can be hard to see down the whole street – you can't see if there are groups of drunk people ahead of you for example.

Lots of street protests take place in Sidwell Street or start from Sidwell Street – these can be very intimidating, and no one seems to be controlling them.

We need to actually deal with the problems and not just move the individuals on – they will just go somewhere else and cause the same problem which would be unfair on those people.

One young person reported that they had regularly seen some of the drunk people at the Coop on Old Tiverton Road shouting and being aggressive.

Street attached people often in Belmont park too – does not feel like a safe place to hang out.

Everyone needs to remember that lots of people live on or very close to Sidwell Street too – its not just shops and pubs.

students are too noisy at nighttime when they walk through or have parties, if you live in this area it should be a nice place for you to live – clean and tidy and you should feel safe to walk

around and you should not have to deal with so much noise all of the time. One young person mentioned that they had a friend who lived on Sidwell street and that it was really not a nice place to have to go to meet their friend or a nice place for their friend to live.

### **Comments from young people**

“I only go there if I absolutely have to”

“It’s extremely unsafe for young people”

“I am not allowed to go past Poundland because it is so bad”

“The Odeon is really sketchy”

“It really smells bad round there – like alcohol and weed”

“I hate that everyone smokes there and they blow smoke into my face”

“I hate having to wait at the bus stop, it’s so dirty and there are often drunk people there”

“It’s really scary, there are always drunk people or drug addicts fighting and shouting”

“I worry about my phone getting stolen”

“I never seen any police on Sidwell Street”

It’s really dirty the pavements are dirty and they smell of alcohol, there are cigarette butts everywhere and often broken glass and takeaway wrappers”

Why are there so many vape shops, we should not be encouraging them, too many young people vape”

“We need to remember that people live in and near Sidwell street and it needs to be a nice place to live”

## **Q2 – What could we do to improve Sidwell Street**

### **Crime and anti-social behaviour**

All of the young people agreed that the key thing was to tackle the issue around street attached people first – they felt that until this issue was properly addressed the same issues would exist. They don’t just want this group to be removed they are asking us to look at how we properly tackle the issue around homelessness and addiction – they realise this is complex but want us all to do more and take care of these individuals.

They want more of a police presence – they felt that police had the authority to deal with some of the problems that occur and that more police being around might stop people who want to cause issues from going there in the first place.

They also think that shops and other premises in the area need better security

They want us to have a very clear no alcohol and drugs policy in Sidwell Street nearby streets – not just for the street attached people but for everyone – students, football fans etc. they want to make this enforceable and very visible.

They would also like it to be a no smoking/no vaping area

### **Investment in Sidwell Street**

They would like better investment in the area

They would like more bins, and for the area to be cleaned properly and regularly – better signage and fines for dropping litter and cigarette butts, clean up the gum from the pavements. Deal with issues of broken glass.

Green spaces – parklets, planters, benches – places that they could enjoy hanging out with their mates in

They like the idea of being creative and would like more cool, funky graffiti art to brighten it up

They also talked about how nice other areas of the city looked – lots of nice decorative lighting and other features and that Sidwell street really lacked these simple things that would make it look more welcoming and more aesthetically pleasing

They would like some public loos – and suggest that paying for them would be ok – the public loos by the Princess Hay shopping centre are really nice

One young person asked if we could make the roundabout look a bit nicer as its pretty grim

### **Events and better use of space**

They felt that there was a lot of wasted space in Sidwell street – it is partly pedestrianised could this be extended to a bigger area – very wide road which could be used for parklets, greenery – they also wanted to see if the space could be better utilised for more useful community things

Lots of the young people talked about markets – they really like the Christmas market as an example and how many people came- they felt the Christmas market was really vibrant, and attractive

They would love a cool street market in Sidwell street – something celebrates art and international food, more pop up events – they would really love some of these to be aimed at their age group and families not just University Students and adults.

They want Sidwell Street to feel like more of a community – that the community can come together and be proud of the place they live in and improve things – they want Sidwell street and the surrounding area – St James/Newtown areas to be great community places to live. They would love to see more community focussed events – and things they would want to attend and feel safe to attend with their friends.

Cycling – a few young people said they would consider cycling – they would not cycle at the moment – the roundabout on Sidwell street is not safe and too busy, Old Tiverton Road is not safe to cycle on or any of the other main roads, there are no cycle racks in Sidwell street – they would also be worried about their bicycles being stolen.

One group would like to see the whole area pedestrianised with bus gates in use

Lots of the young people talked about working in collaboration with other key organisations such as the University, Exeter City Football Club, The Rugby club, cricket club etc.

### **Comments from young people**

“it firstly needs to be safe so deal with the drunk people and drug addicts”

“Make it a no drinking and no drug taking area and make sure that the police enforce it”

“We need a sense of community, taking care of the area together”

“People who live here need to feel safe”

“We could have street fairs, markets, food stalls and close the road”

“More interesting and less grim and depressing to walk through – cool funky street art”

“Create pop up shops – lots of empty shops, we could use them for more interesting things”

“Please just clean up the street to start with, it smells and its dirty”

### **Q3) What would improve your experience of visiting Sidwell Street/City centre as a young person?**

All of the young people agreed that there was very little on offer for them currently

Generally, they do not use Sidwell Street for the reasons outlined in Q1 – there are not really any shops of interest to them on Sidwell Street

They did not feel that the current café/restaurant offering on Sidwell street was aimed at their age group and again felt that it was not safe to go to and did not want to sit where people were smoking or vaping

In the wider city – they felt that most of the shops in the city centre were expensive/aimed at adults or University students with very little aimed at the teenage market. They really like the idea of pop up shops, and creative spaces as well as sports places

Some young people said that they liked Fore Street – noting that it was a bit like Sidwell street in appearance but that it had a few more interesting shops that they liked to visit.

All of the young people said that they felt that all they could do in the city centre was wonder about – there was nowhere specific that they felt was a designated place for them to meet with friends

They all mentioned the cost of activities and that this prevented them from participating in most things – such as bowling, climbing – none of these places are directly located in the city but down on the quay which is quite a long way for young people to travel – especially in the evening

When asked to think about an activity they could participate in closer to Sidwell Street they could only think of the driving range at Clifton Hill and one young person attended Scouts locally.

They felt that local parks were lacking in facilities for teenagers – equipment all for young children, Belmont could be a local park for them to use, they felt it was not safe, and lacked facilities such a café and recreational activities

They were worried about the presence of individuals who were drunk or on drugs in the park and some young people had said that they had left Belmont park before due to these individuals being there. They were also worried about broken glass in the grass and used needles.

They all said that they were fed up of feeling like the only food place on offer for teenagers was McDonalds, all said they would really like to go to cafes with different kinds of food on offer – more healthy food and international food – they were all happy to be adventurous and try new things but that they were limited by cost and having spaces that would welcome a small group of teens.

They felt that there was potential in areas like Sidwell street to create new spaces– the Odeon for example has a huge empty space upstairs that could be a café or vintage games arcade

They talked about seeing teen spaces in TV shows and films – all of these places look great and designed for teens and a space where all teenagers come together to meet, the reality is really very different, these places simply do not exist for young people.

They all felt really strongly that they just wanted a place to meet with friends that was safe and looked cool where they could sit and chat and enjoy a drink and snack, - a teen café or space - a space for them, designed by them – they also talked about having the ability to work and earn money safely – could they work in these kinds of spaces.

one group thought that a teen hub with a monthly membership would work so that everyone was invested in it and looked after it.

They also recognised that there were limited facilities for younger children in the city centre – no family friendly spaces – everything was aimed at university students or adults – bars, restaurants and shops.

### **Comments from young people**

“We lost the Boneyard arcade which was cool and did not cost much to go to, it is being turned into student flats, that was the only place I liked to go to”

“On TV they always have these really cool spaces like cafes where the teenagers hang out, the reality is so different they don’t exist”

“We don’t want to go to McDonalds; we like other types of food but its too expensive to eat out”

“There is nothing to do in the city centre other than wonder around and jump off walls”

“Activities like bowling and the climbing walls and escape rooms are expensive – we can’t afford to go to those places”

“in the parks the equipment is for younger kids there is nothing there for our age group”

“We would love a safe teen space to hang out with our friends in – somewhere cool, for us that we could also work in and earn some money”