

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

25 September 2025

Present:

Councillor Catherine Rees (Chair)
Councillors Cookson, Begley, Fullam, Holland, Hussain, Moore, Parkhouse, Payne, Pole, Read and Wardle

Apologies:

Councillors Darling and Snow

Also present:

Strategic Director for Place, Strategic Director for People and Communities and Democratic Services Officer (LS)

In attendance as Portfolio Holder:

Councillors Asvachin, Vizard, Williams, R. and Wright

75 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee held on 3 July 2025 were taken as read, approved as correct subject to the addition of missing apostrophes, Councillor Pole's name to a comment made and clarification that the roll out of food waste collections would be complete in 2026 in place of 2026/27.

76 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest made by Members.

77 Anti-Social Behaviour in the City Centre

The Chair welcomed students from St James' School, who gave a presentation making the following points:

- they felt unsafe and tried to avoid Sidwell St where possible due to alcohol, drug use, and violence;
- they did not feel that there were any shops on Sidwell St that they would use;
- the issues could be dealt with by tackling anti-social behaviour, investing in the area, creating events, and working with the individuals living and working near Sidwell St;
- they felt that the city was not designed for young people and there was little for them to do;
- a lack of food options and affordable activities were also an issue; and
- they thanked the committee for listening to their presentation and hope they had been able to read the notes that were provided.

During discussion Members made the following points:

- they thanked the students for their thoughtful presentation and report;
- the city was not designed for young people and wanted to know what they would like on Sidwell St;
- the empty shop spaces could provide spaces for teen hubs, designed and run by young people; and
- parents would not allow a young person onto Sidwell St;

The Chair thanked the students for their presentation, and asked the students if they would be happy for her to visit the school to follow up by sharing the outcomes of this meeting.

The Chair invited Councillor Michael Mitchell to set out his proposal for the item under Standing Order No.45. In doing so he made the following points:

- there had been a lengthy debate on this item previously; and
- he wanted to reassure concerned citizens of the city that this evening's scrutiny was a starting point and not an end point.

The Chair invited InExeter and Inspector Devon and Cornwall Police as representatives of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) ASB sub-group to give a presentation.

During their presentation they made the following points:

- the students' views were consistent with what was heard from businesses in the city centre;
- there were significant concerns from local businesses about the rising rate of ASB and that this was going unchecked;
- they wanted Exeter to maintain its reputation of being a safe city;
- they felt that students were far more at risk at home online than they were on Sidwell Street;
- a key activity was hotspot policing which had been in place since May 2024 and would continue until at least May 2026;
- the City Council's Community Safety team carried out daily visible patrols and they had been working with the police regarding ASB and shop theft;
- the St. Sidwell Centre's garden was becoming a hotspot for ASB;
- they were working with Exeter City Council and the police to address encampments;
- the city Council's CCTV control room was monitored 24/7 and staff were taking a pro-active approach in identifying perpetrators of crime;
- Exeter City Council had introduced the Need Help signs, which gave people direct contact to the control centre;
- there had been a campaign to help de-stigmatise people causing ASB led by the Inspector, which helped people understand that they were a community of marginalised and vulnerable individuals;
- there had been fewer issues in the Sidwell Centre's garden following interventions over the summer;
- there had been an ASB spike in August due to decreased ability to fill hotspot patrols;
- there were enhanced patrols and focus in nine key areas;
- the Community Safety Team were SIA accredited, first aid trained and were able to signpost vulnerable individuals to relevant support agencies;
- there was a perception of not feeling safe in the city centre, which existed partly due to media coverage;
- they had met with key partners in the city to discuss those with the highest demand;
- work needed to be done to ensure there were no barriers to access;
- 30 streetlights had been reported as not working during the University's Welcome Week, the repair of these would be a quick-win and would help people feel safer at night; and
- an update on progress and activity would be given to the Committee in 12 months.

In response to Members' questions, the following answers were provided:

- the slide with dispersals within the PSPO area detailed the reasons for dispersal and whilst most could be classed as ASB some were also criminal therefore described separately;
- they were grateful for councillor involvement in local meetings;
- it was clear that better communication was needed about the range of activities being undertaken to tackle ASB;
- people were not always confident on whether to report ASB if they felt it was low level;
- it had been proven that when dispersed ASB did not move on to other areas, and ASB in the city centre would not be considered ASB in other areas;
- The Police officer present carried out 1 hour of foot patrol a day and there was evidence that 20 minutes of police visibility deterred ASB but any longer did not have further impact;
- there was a backlog in courts and there was finite funding for overtime but it was centrally government funded; and
- needle bins did not encourage drug use.

The Chair stated that Questions from the Public would now be heard before the remainder of the evidence on Anti-Social Behaviour in the City Centre.

78 **Questions from the Public under Standing Order No. 19**

There was one question from the public. The Chair invited Mrs Storrie to read her question:

“Residents in St. David's frequently experience unacceptable levels of anti-social behaviour related to unauthorised camping, particularly around Bartholomew and Friernhay cemeteries. This includes littering, abandoned tents, suspected drug-taking, vomiting and defecation. What measures are being taken by the Council to support rough sleepers and residents and to prevent anti-social behaviour?”

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Homelessness Prevention and Customer Services, Councillor Asvachin responded:

“The Council contracts a range of services for external organisations to support rough sleepers with the aim of enabling people who are street attached to find and settle in accommodation. This is funded through government grants and is on top of the statutory homeless prevention and support services the council funds and provides directly. The external contracts include an Outreach Service whose role is to get to know each rough sleeper, ascertain if they have a place to sleep indoors, (many do, but for a variety of complex reasons stay attached to street sleeping) and if not, they get alongside to steer people into pathways for accommodation. For people that do have a place to sleep indoors, the Outreach Service will work with them to resolve the barriers to indoor sleeping: which can be complex and take time to resolve. Where the Outreach Service identify rough sleepers who are genuinely homeless but have no right to statutory services in Exeter, every effort is made to help relieve their homelessness. This means that the Outreach Service will work with individuals to explore all avenues to help them find accommodation (which could mean reconnection to another area), and to help them access wider support that they may need.

In addition to the Outreach Service the council contracts a range of supported and temporary accommodation for those faced with homelessness.

The Council, as part of Safer Exeter Community Safety Partnership, is committed to tackling ASB across the city. During Thursday` evening`s Customer Focus Scrutiny

meeting, Nicola Wheeler, Chair of the ASB sub-group will present a summary of the steps being taken to tackle ASB within the city centre. The Council investigates reports of ASB in other parts of the city and will work with relevant agencies to address concerns.

The Community Safety Team have made several evictions of encampments in the Bartholomew Street and Catacomb areas in recent weeks. Several people have either been dispersed from the area or temporarily allowed to remain whilst the outreach team engages with them for means of support. Both areas are now regularly patrolled as a result.”

79 **Anti-Social Behaviour in the City Centre**

INCLUSIVE EXETER (slides attached) presented their evidence making the following points:

- were an organisation for people of colour, dealing with some complex issues, intertwined with vulnerability and facing racism;
- there had been a rise in racist incidents following the Brexit vote in 2016;
- some politicians had used divisive language rather than supporting;
- migrant workers needed more support from their employers;
- migrant workers were essential for the economy;
- it was important to ensure that staff were trained in inclusivity and that diversity mirrored the community;
- potential solutions included:
 - prioritise anti-racism;
 - investigate and act upon racial inequality;
 - involve people of colour;
 - More support for migrant workers from employers;
 - People of colour in higher ranks of statutory organisations;
 - counteract racism; and
 - foster cross-cultural and meaningful understanding; and
- Inclusive Exeter ran drop-in sessions, which were collaborative events to ensure access to diverse communities.

EXETER CITY COMMUNITY TRUST (slides attached) presented their evidence making the following points:

- Exeter City Football Club (ECFC) had received money from the Police and Crime Commissioner to help tackle youth crime through a mentoring program (Peer Action Collective PAC);
- PAC was a research programme with young people which was coming to an end;
- There had been a team of young people aged 16 to 21 who had engaged with almost 500 young people;
- a national report had been released the previous day;
- there were not enough safe spaces or trusted adults for young people and the Trust were working with partners to look at building youth provision; and
- one of the best provisions they had visited was at the mosque.

ST PETROCK'S presented their evidence making the following points:

- they had been in Exeter for 30 years and wanted to reinforce that their work couldn't be done alone;
- the individuals they supported were scared of ASB and they were often victims;
- it was important to find alternative spaces that were not alcohol related was important;

- it was expensive to run public toilets, was there an alternative that could be in place for both the homeless and the night-time economy;
- a lot of issues that were being discussed were outside of the control of Exeter City Council and came from austerity;
- the supportive housing commissioned by the council was full and there was a waiting list;
- they encouraged good behaviour amongst their clients and aimed to support them to feel part of the city;
- they worked with the police and community safety team where problematic behaviour is seen; and
- those responsible for ASB on Cathedral Green would be excluded from their services for a time and then a behaviour contract would be implemented.

CO-LAB presented their evidence making the following points:

- they reinforced what had already been discussed and confirmed that they were part
- of the ASB sub-group of the Community Safety Partnership;
- an important message was that this issue was about health and public health and it was important to all work together;
- ASB was from unmet needs;
- the key causes were;
 - lack of safe space and activity;
 - boredom and loneliness;
 - housing and eviction rates;
 - substance misuse; and
 - absence of dual-diagnosis services.
- other areas were having success with;
 - day centres;
 - restorative justice;
 - peer support;
 - consistent dispersal;
 - integrated support;
 - multi-agency planning; and
 - shared housing plans.
- there were spikes in ASB on bank holidays;
- there needed to be a reduction in evictions and people needed support to build skills around obtaining and maintaining tenancy; and
- needle bins were successful and did not encourage drug taking.

WAYTHROUGH presented their evidence making the following points:

- they were the commissioned service delivering Together Drug & Alcohol services for adults in DCC footprint;
- there was also Star project in Exeter city centre for those at risk of/rough sleeping;
- they offered a range of support for alcohol/drug issues such as: psycho-social groups, 1:1, medical or rehab;
- these were some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in our city;
- focus should remain on the behaviour not the person and address the underlying issues for that person which would support change;
- ASB wasn't only from those with substance misuse issues, housing was an issue in the city with many unable to find suitable housing for their needs and a lack of places to gather that made them feel part of the community;
- access to substances in the city (spice seen a lot in Exeter) was an issue with limited out of hours and crisis support or support for underlying trauma or issues people were masking or trying to deal with;

- community projects to make people feel valued and run by peers or those with lived experience could help and these would need to meet people where they were physically or mentally;
- a multi-agency response was key. In Birmingham there had been a project where shoplifters in the city sat with businesses and were given funding to address underlying issues which saved money in the long run;
- Waythrough had a Community Development Lead who undertook meaningful activities which run on Saturdays when possible.

The Chair drew the evidence-giving to a close highlighting that a joined-up approach was clearly needed and it was good to hear about the good work already happening in the city and asked the committee to focus on what could be done better or what councillors could do to improve the issue for residents.

Representatives from the CSP ASB sub-group, Inclusive Exeter, ECFC Community Trust, Co-lab, St Petrock's and Public Health responded to Members' questions in the following terms:

- a number of businesses had publicly visible toilets on their premises already and mapping those businesses who go over and above for the community was being considered. InExeter looked at the feasibility of funding to begin this project which would be part of the solution but not the only answer;
- Police service unfortunately come when a crime is committed but visibility was important. Building trust could help deflect those thinking about perpetrating a crime. Underreporting of crime by people of colour was an issue. It was understood that funding was an issue for the Police but a daily discussion with business owners may build trust;
- prevention was key and the Community Trust was building diversionary programmes for young people, understanding the passion of each individual. Education could be challenging;
- relationships were part of prevention and building relationships could help de-escalate behaviour and this is what the Community Safety Team and City Centre police team were all about;
- ASB maybe exasperated by those who may not have much empathy due to difficulties of their own. Build empathy by going into schools could be part of the solution;
- the Star team had highlighted how hard it was to get people into treatment but Exeter was lucky to have STAR team funding. There wasn't anywhere to stay for detox from drugs or alcohol in the city;
- sharps bins had been piloted previously by ECC in 2019 and perhaps could be revisited;
- there wasn't enough funding for detox and rehab. Together had already spent their budget with 6 months of the year remaining and had received extra from the commissioner;
- for rough sleepers or those at risk, getting into residential detox was very difficult as there no way to secure housing before they go and they were often deemed too high risk;
- the flag was part of cultural identity and people should be proud of it rather than a representation of division and scapegoating;
- people of colour born in the UK felt unsafe and a personal account of memories of racism was given and the pattern being seen replicated;
- diversity needed to be visibly seen across all hierarchy. There was a Hackney driver representing taxi drivers, who lived in the city and represented the Afghan community. There was an NHS worker present, who lived in the city but didn't feel their voices were heard;
- once in accommodation all other challenges were not resolved and there were more rules to live by and rent to pay;

- many were detached from their community, without strong family support and not having positive peers. People met on the street were their links and essentially their family and they were loyal to each other which wasn't always a good thing. Success occurred when they were able to step away from those social structures but it could take many attempts before it had an impact;
- St Petrock's modelled good behaviour for example give out lunch and a bin liner;
- many had Adverse Childhood Experiences and lacked a trusted adult in their life;
- communicating the message that those on our streets were our most vulnerable as often they appeared scary to those who had better life experiences was key and there was an event being planned for later in the autumn;
- perception of ASB was greater than the reality;
- Councillor's Vizard and Wright were Member representatives on the ASB sub-group;
- there was a local drug information service where people could report substances which had perhaps been contaminated. There had been concerns at the beginning of the year of potential contamination and some batches were tested and no adulterants were found;
- there was not a lot for young people to do but local schools and young people weren't aware that they could go to certain youth centres in the evening or even that they existed. None of the students ECFC Community Trust had spoken to knew about it and adults also weren't aware. The mosque had a great youth club with excellent adults and facilities and a lot had been learnt from them;
- if young people were not out in cold dark evenings they were at home online with additional risks; and
- there was work to be done across sectors which presented difficulties but also opportunities and funding drove partners into silos which it was essential to step outside and work together.

Councillor Fullam proposed, seconded by Councillor Moore a cross-party task and finish group to look at the overview of ASB work as there had been a summit in 2020, CSP work since last year and there had been a turnover of ward councillors. He set out that this was not to replicate the work of the ASB sub-group or to say that anything was being done wrongly but rather to see what else could be investigated.

The Chair invited the Strategic Director for Place to comment on the proposal and he made the following points:

- all the contributions made were welcomed;
- reflecting on what had been heard, there was a task and finish group in the form of the ASB sub-group of the CSP;
- the CSP was a statutory body which was multi-agency and many partners were in the room;
- the CSP was a genuine partnership based on actions which had been formulated in an action plan;
- the CSP had other priorities in addition to ASB, one of which was extremism and hate crime;
- there was evidence still to come from the residents survey and there were questions about ASB in it;
- there was risk of duplication;
- he would need to check whether the Health and Wellbeing Board still met; and

- was there a different way in which elected members could contribute as the energy in the room could be seen.

Councillor Fullam as proposer wanted to see a different, wider view from elected Members' and to try to facilitate other changes. He said there was great passion that something could be achieved and challenges had been laid down by other professionals. He finished by saying that a task and finish group was a tool which the committee had and it could have an overview and apply learning to the context of citizens of Exeter.

The committee took a break at 1956 and reconvened at 2005.

During debate Members' made the following points in support of the proposal:

- local authorities had a power to promote wellbeing in their area and the evidence heard showed a lack of wellbeing;
- there was a strategic gap as there was a health and wellbeing board but nothing for Exeter;
- there were gaps in the Council's policies and strategies and mapping of those would be good and an example was given of objecting to a gambling licence where no policy on community wellbeing meant no challenge to the licence; and
- 38 streetlights not working in the city centre suggested that statutory agencies were not working together as they should be and the CSP was great but not as open and transparent as a task and finish group would be.

During debate Members' made the following points against the proposal:

- ASB was a very important and emotive issue and a lot had been learnt;
- the way forward was the CSP ASB sub group which had officers and two members of the Executive on it as representatives of the city council and Members' could work with them if they felt their voices weren't being heard;
- there maybe duplication which would not be desirable; and
- there was a Wellbeing Exeter Strategy and health and wellbeing were key priorities within the new Corporate Plan.

In response to questions from Members', The Strategic Director for Place informed the committee that he chaired the CSP Executive Group and he was aware of a resolution which had been passed stating that minutes would be published of all CSP meetings, papers, presentations, from the executive, management group and all 5 sub-groups. If requested, regular reports would be brought to Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee but the next step would be for officers to provide a report with evidence and data on ASB as well as responses from the residents survey. He also added that public health was an upper-tier responsibility, but the city council chose to make this a priority.

The Chair stated that she believed that the item didn't come as opposition but as a desire to look at the causes of ASB and situation within the proposer's ward in the city centre. She believed that all wanted the same thing, all residents to feel safe and to thrive and not to undermine the fantastic joined up approach of the CSP but to enhance it and address gaps which arose, including information about silo working forced by funding and she believed that officer time could be saved in the future.

In summing up Councillor Fullam stated that this was not a partisan issue and there was no criticism of the Executive held within his proposal but there was value which could be added to the work underway.

Following a vote the motion was **NOT CARRIED**.

Councillor Moore proposed, seconded by Councillor Read that the concerns of inclusive Exeter be presented to the police and DCC and formally to ECC regarding how we better work with our diverse communities and following a unanimous vote, was **CARRIED**.

80 **Portfolio Holder Update - Councillor Wright (Deputy Leader & Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services, Community Safety and City Centre)**

The Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services, Community Safety, and City Centre, Deputy Leader, Councillor Wright, presented her update making the following points:

- Councillors would not be invited to the ASB sub-group as it would not be appropriate at present. This was chaired by InExeter;
- she would like another all Councillor briefing from the CSP;
- the Exeter Safety Charter would be coming to SMB;
- Exeter was a City of Sanctuary;
- ASB could be reduced by decreasing the number of late off-sales licenses;
- there had been discussion surrounding the installation of bleed kits, following campaigning by Mia Hawker, whose friend was stabbed and died last year in Bristol;
- the Police were using their own approved translators which had caused issues with waiting times for taking witness reports;
- ECFC's idea of a youth panel was excellent and she would be discussing opportunities for the council with them;
- there would be investigation into the cost for providing and emptying portable toilets, as there had been reports of people defecating on the streets during the day; and
- darkness on the High Street needed to be addressed, as well as ensuring trees that obscure CCTV cameras are cut back appropriately.

During discussion, Members made the following comments:

- they appreciated the way Councillor Wright worked in a cross-party manner;
- could licensing be asked to review their policy on sales of alcohol;
- it was difficult for the Licensing Committee to argue or reject an application when there was no response from authorities; and
- some applications were dealt with under delegated powers but Members were able to look through these.

Councillor Moore proposed, and Councillor Read seconded, that the committee recommend to Licensing that their policies be reviewed with regard to out of hours off-sales of alcohol. Following a vote, this was **CARRIED**.

RESOLVED that the Customer Focus Scrutiny Committee recommends that the Licensing Committee review their policies with regard to out of hours off-sales of alcohol.

81 **Portfolio Holder Update - Councillor Vizard (Portfolio Holder for Climate, Ecological Change & Communities)**

The Portfolio Holder for Climate, Ecological Change, and Communities, Councillor Vizard, presented his update which was taken as read.

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

- each department was coming up with plans, ideas, and mitigations to work towards net zero and he would respond outside the meeting with regard to what had been done differently as a result of carbon literacy training and the roadmap;
- Inclusive Exeter provided an important contribution and he spoke with them intermittently but would aim to provide a bridge between communities and the council as he had heard this evening that people did not feel seen and heard;
- he asked that Cllr Moore put her question to him via email about disposing of assets as it may fall under the portfolio of the Leader; and
- the oversight of the city grants also sat with the ward Councillors and the community builders. The city grants budget was approximately one third spent, and they received a healthy number of applications each round.

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

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20 no questions were submitted in advance of the meeting.

Councillor Read asked the Portfolio Holder for City Management, whether a response had been received from the Environment Agency regarding the levels of algae in the canal and in a supplementary question whether there was a named contact. Councillor Williams was in attendance and responded that a response had not been received and that the contact was a general one and not a named person.

Councillor Read asked the Deputy Leader, who was in attendance whether the correction in the Scrutiny Annual Report had been made and where the updated version could be found? The Democratic Services Officer responded that this would be followed up.

Councillor Read asked if there had been a response from government with regard to the information on box shifting sent as a result of the recommendation made by this committee to the Executive. It was agreed that a response would be provided outside the meeting.

83 **Scrutiny Work Plan and Proposals Received**

The Chair proposed, to the approval of the Committee, that:

- The item on refuse bins be moved the 19 March 2026;
- The item on Homelessness and the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Homelessness Prevention and Support Services Update be moved to 22 January 2026 to allow enough time for the Budget item in November; and
- Key People Activity Across the Council and Portfolio Holder for Arts, Culture and Tourism be moved from January 2026 to 13 November 2025.

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

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 9.00 pm

Chair