REPORT TO EXECUTIVE

Date of Meeting: 3rd February 2026

REPORT TO COUNCIL

Date of Meeting: 3rd March 2026

Report of: Strategic Director for People and Communities

Title: Consultation and Engagement Strategy

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Council

1.   What is the report about?

1.1 This report seeks approval for the adoption of the Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2026–2028 (Appendix A). The strategy sets out Exeter City Council's approach to understanding, consulting, and engaging with communities, ensuring that diverse voices are heard and integrated into decision-making. This report also summarises the findings of the public survey and engagement with VCSE sector (Appendices B and C) on the draft strategy and outlines changes in response to feedback received.

2.   Recommendations:

2.1 That Executive recommends to Council approval adoption of the Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2025–2028, (Referred to in this paper as the Strategy)

3.   Reasons for the recommendation:

3.1 The strategy provides a clear, principles-based framework for consultation and engagement, aligned with the Council's Corporate Plan. Survey feedback demonstrates broad support for the strategy's aims and principles, but also highlights areas for improvement, particularly around clarity, accessibility, trust, and inclusivity. Adopting the amended strategy will help ensure that engagement is meaningful, representative, and responsive to community needs.

4.   What are the resource implications including non-financial resources:

4.1 Since February 2025 a new Consultation and Engagement Manager has been in post, helping to develop the strategy and guide consultation activity. Implementation of the Strategy will require officer time for training, monitoring, and delivery of engagement activities. Some additional resources may be needed to support non-digital and specialist large-scale engagement methods and to ensure accessibility for all communities. There is £120,000 allocated in the Customers and Communities service budget to deliver this work. This budget has already contributed to delivering large scale consultation, such as

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the 2025 Residents survey and the Local Government reorganisation engagement activity.

5.   Section 151 Officer comments:

5.1 There are no additional financial implications for Council to consider.

6.   What are the legal aspects?

6.1 The purpose of the strategy is to support compliance with statutory consultation requirements and the Equality Act 2010.

6.2 The Strategy states that where there is a defined legal process for consultation, then those processes will be followed. However, these consultations will take into consideration the principles of the consultation and engagement strategy and the consultation charter.

7.   Monitoring Officer's comments:

7.1 The Monitoring Officer has no additional comments.

8.   Equality Act 2010 (The Act)

8.1 In recommending this proposal potential impact has been identified on people with protected characteristics as determined by the Act and an Equality Impact Assessment has been included in the background papers for Member's attention (Appendix D).

9.   Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:

9.1 No direct carbon/environmental impacts arising from the recommendations. However, the strategy encourages digital engagement where appropriate, which may reduce travel-related emissions.

9.2 Where travel is required, to ensure wider community engagement, lower carbon options will be the preferred option

10.   Report details:

10.1 This section summarises the findings from the consultation process and outlines the recommended changes to the Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2025–2028. The strategy sits alongside the Consultation Charter, (which sets
out corporate guidance - Appendix E), and outlines Exeter City Council's approach to improving how we understand, consult, and engage with communities, and other stakeholders, ensuring that diverse voices are heard and integrated into decision-making. It is informed by public survey results and engagement with the VCSE sector, with recommended changes made in response to feedback.

10.2 The areas for strategic focus outlined in the strategy are as follows:

10.2.1 Understand Communities: Use research, empathy mapping, and community data to gain meaningful insights and build trust.

10.2.2 Define Scope & Objectives of all Activities: Use data to create consistent, transparent processes and ensure community voices are central to decision-making.

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10.2.3 Innovative, Inclusive and Representative Methods: Embrace digital platforms, go to where people are, and use workshops and community representation to reach diverse groups.

10.2.4 Prototype, Test & Improve: Foster a culture of learning, pilot new methods, and adapt based on feedback.

10.3 Equity, Empathy, Collaboration, Transparency, Trust, Flexibility, Co-Design, Accountability and Time are the core principles guiding all engagement activities. The strategy commits to meeting the Gunning Principles for fair consultation and aligns with the Central Government Civil Society Covenant.

10.4 Success will be measured continually and reported on annually by:

- number and diversity of consultations and participants;
- positive feedback and timely reporting;
- increased trust and sense of influence among residents;
- reduction in FOI requests and improved engagement outcomes.

10.5 The focus of the consultation was to gather in-depth qualitative feedback from VCSE representatives, as well as individuals and other stakeholders. One hundred community groups were invited to participate, and the Communities team also held several meetings with VCSE representatives outlining the strategy. In total 47 responses were received This feedback is captured in the full detail report (Appendix C) and in the Summary of Feedback, which outlines the key themes and responses (Appendix B).

10.5.1 Whilst generally supportive and positive, (72% felt the strategy was relevant or very relevant to communities and stakeholders), consultation responses highlighted the need for clearer aims and purpose, greater clarity around the focus areas, more accessible language, stronger commitments to inclusion and representation, and clarity around which stakeholders the Strategy included. Respondents also emphasised the importance of addressing participation bias, digital exclusion, and ensuring that engagement methods were genuinely accessible to all parts of the community

10.5.2 Key improvements made in response to this feedback:

Purpose and Aims
- Added a dedicated section detailing the purpose and aims of the strategy.
- Linked these aims to the wider work of the Council.

Definitions
- Defined what consultation and engagement mean in practice.
- Clarified that consultation and engagement are not equivalent to a referendum.
- Set clear expectations for these processes.

Focus Areas
- Increased detail in each focus area to show what will be done and how.
- Removed jargon and ensured clarity on how aims will be achieved.

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- Assigned responsibility for delivering each focus area.
- Added an 'Expected Outcomes' section for each focus area.
- Reduced focus areas from five to four.
- Created a separate section on implementation, listing enablers.
- Strengthened partnership working with community groups.
- Added detail on improving representation through inclusive and equitable approaches.
- Addressed self-selection bias and outlined steps to reduce its impact.

Key Principles
- Expanded principles to include co-design and accountability.
- Changed 'inclusive' to equity for clearer commitment to representation.

References and Frameworks
- Added clarity on Gunning Principles and Civil Society Covenant.

Measures of Success
- Made success measures more meaningful for ECC and Exeter residents.
- Reduced emphasis on purely numerical metrics.
- Added measures on how people feel about involvement and representative feedback

10.5.3 These changes ensure the updated strategy is clearer, more inclusive, and more accountable to the needs and expectations of Exeter's communities, in response to the consultation feedback (Appendices B).

11. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

11.1 The strategy supports all of the Corporate Plan's priorities by ensuring that services reflect the needs and aspirations of Exeter's diverse communities. For example, it can help the Council understand concerns around community safety and experiences of Exeter's culture offer, as well as barriers that prevent access to essential services

12. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

12.1 Risks include low participation, unrepresentative feedback, and failure to act on engagement outcomes. These can be mitigated by adopting the recommended changes, ensuring robust monitoring, and maintaining transparent communication with communities.

13. Are there any other options?

13.1 The Council could choose not to adopt the strategy or to adopt it without amendment. However, this would risk missing the opportunity to address community concerns and improve engagement practice.

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Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

- Red Quadrant Report – Customer Intelligence at Exeter City Council (2023)

List of Appendices:

- Appendix A: Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2026–28
- Appendix B: Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2026-28 Summary of Feedback Themes and Responses
- Appendix C: Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2026-28 Full details Responses Report
- Appendix D: Consultation and Engagement Strategy 2026-28: EQIA
- Appendix E: Consultation Charter

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