Exeter City Council

Exeter Port and Harbour Business Plan

2025 -2028

EXETER PORT AUTHORITY

Version Control	
Document produced:	**EPA Team**
Previous Versions:	**2/11/23**
Current Version:	**28/02/26**
Service Lead – Plan Owner:	**Head of Operations**

EXETER PORT AUTHORITY

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Executive Summary

Exeter City Council is responsible for one of the South West's most historic and environmentally significant waterways. Stretching from Exmouth to Exeter's historic canal and quay, the Exe Estuary, designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and an internationally important Ramsar site, supports a vibrant mix of recreation, heritage, nature and economic activity. As the Statutory Harbour Authority, the Council delivers safe, responsible and well-managed harbour services through the Exeter Port Authority (EPA) team, working in partnership with water users, local organisations and the Harbour Board

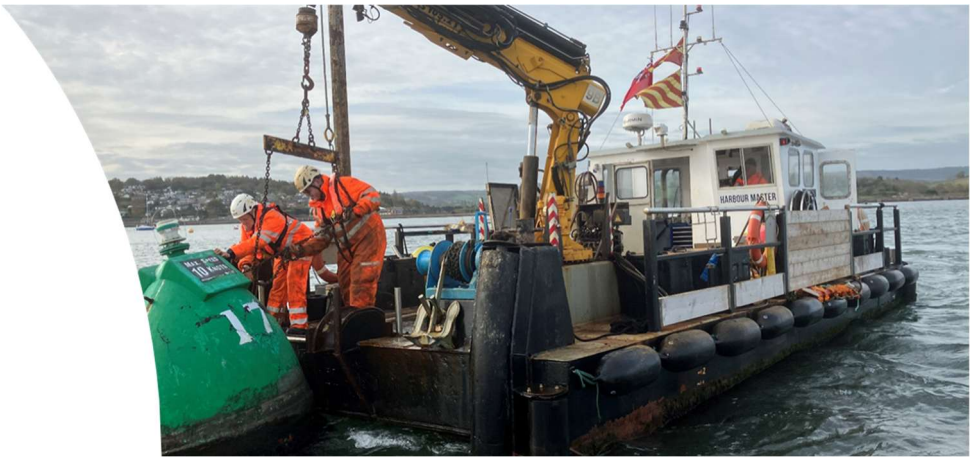
Our aim is to operate a safe, efficient and sustainable eco-harbour that enhances wellbeing, supports leisure and commercial activity, and protects the unique natural environment of the estuary and canal. This commitment is underpinned by our core values: responsibility for marine safety, proactive environmental stewardship, meaningful stakeholder engagement, value-for-money services and strong governance.

The Business Plan outlines a focused programme of improvements, including achieving full compliance with the Port Marine Safety Code, updating legislation through a Harbour Revision Order, modernising safety systems and maintaining national-standard navigation aids. Alongside these priorities, EPA will continue strengthening partnerships with clubs, businesses and community groups to ensure services remain accessible, relevant and aligned with best practice across the marine sector.

Environmental resilience and climate responsibility sit at the heart of our work. We are committed to protecting biodiversity, improving waterway resilience and supporting wider council initiatives such as equipment electrification, afforestation and sustainable watercourse management.

Our dedicated workforce, supported by volunteers who contribute around 200 hours annually, plays a vital role in keeping the waterways safe, welcoming and well-managed. Continued investment in training, digital modernisation and workforce development ensures we can meet rising expectations around safety, quality and customer experience.

Together, these commitments provide a clear and ambitious direction for Exeter's waterways—one that delivers a safer, more accessible, environmentally responsible and financially sustainable harbour for all.



Introduction

The Exe Estuary and Exeter Ship Canal form a 12-kilometre waterway renowned for its natural beauty, heritage value and active water-sports community. Recognised internationally for its conservation importance, the estuary attracts a wide range of users—from paddleboarders and sailors to wildlife enthusiasts and visitors seeking to experience one of the region's most distinctive environments.

Exeter City Council serves as the Statutory Harbour Authority for the estuary, canal and port approaches. This includes responsibility for navigation safety, waterway management, environmental stewardship and the long-term care of the historic Ship Canal, which also holds prestigious Heritage Harbour status.

These duties are delivered by the Exeter Port Authority (EPA) team with strategic guidance from the Harbour Board. Bringing together elected members and independent representatives with maritime and local expertise, the Board plays a key role in shaping safe, responsible and future-focused management of the harbour.

EPA works closely with estuary users, partners and community groups to ensure safe and enjoyable access to the water, supported by a range of harbour services. This Business Plan sets out the long-term vision and the immediate priorities for the next three years, including progressing a Harbour Revision Order to ensure the Port operates under modern, effective and transparent powers.

Grahame Forshaw MBE MNI

Harbour Master, Exeter Port Authority

Governance

Strong, transparent governance is central to how we manage Exeter's waterways and ensure they remain safe, well-run and welcoming for everyone. Exeter City Council's Executive Committee acts as the Duty Holder under the Port Marine Safety Code, carrying overall responsibility for the safe and compliant operation of the harbour. To provide independent assurance, the Executive receives an annual report from the Council's Designated Person, an external maritime specialist who reviews the effectiveness of our safety systems and confirms that risks are being properly identified, managed and monitored.

Supporting this, the Harbour Board plays a key advisory and oversight role. Bringing together elected councillors and independent members with professional maritime and local expertise, the Board helps shape policy, reviews safety and operational performance, and guides the modernisation of harbour powers. Established in line with the Department for Transport's Ports Good Governance guidance, the Board meets regularly and reports to the Council through agreed Terms of Reference, ensuring clear accountability, transparency and independent scrutiny.

Working alongside these governance bodies, the Exeter Port Authority team provides the day-to-day operational leadership needed to keep the estuary, harbour and canal running smoothly. Together, the Executive, Harbour Board and Harbour Team form a single, coordinated system of leadership, assurance and frontline expertise. This partnership approach ensures that decisions are well-informed, safety-led and forward-looking, and that everyone—from residents and visitors to clubs, businesses and maritime organisations—can enjoy a harbour that is well managed, sustainable and trusted.

Our Vision

To be a safe, user-friendly and financially sustainable harbour which contributes positively to the wellbeing of residents and visitors, net-zero ambitions, and the local economy whilst maintaining the character, beauty and leisure potential, biodiversity and ecological health of the Port of Exeter.

Our Mission

To operate a modern, safety led and efficiently run harbour that upholds exemplary standards of marine safety while delivering value for money, sustainable services consistent with principles of good governance and environmental stewardship. We will enhance and protect the estuary and canal for current and future users, support active lifestyles and community wellbeing, and ensure that our operations adapt effectively to forthcoming administrative and organisational developments.-led and efficiently run harbour that upholds exemplary standards of marine safety while delivering value-for-money, sustainable services consistent with principles of good governance and environmental stewardship. We will enhance and protect the estuary and canal for current and future users, support active lifestyles and community wellbeing, and ensure that our operations adapt effectively to forthcoming administrative and organisational developments

Our Core Values

Our values align with the priorities set out in the Exeter City Council 2025–28 corporate plan, which focuses on supporting people and communities, fostering a sustainable environment, strengthening the local economy and ensuring well-run, responsible services. At the same time, we recognise that we are custodians of an estuary and harbour that extends beyond the administrative boundary and plays a vital role in enriching the lives, wellbeing and opportunities of people across the wider sub-region.

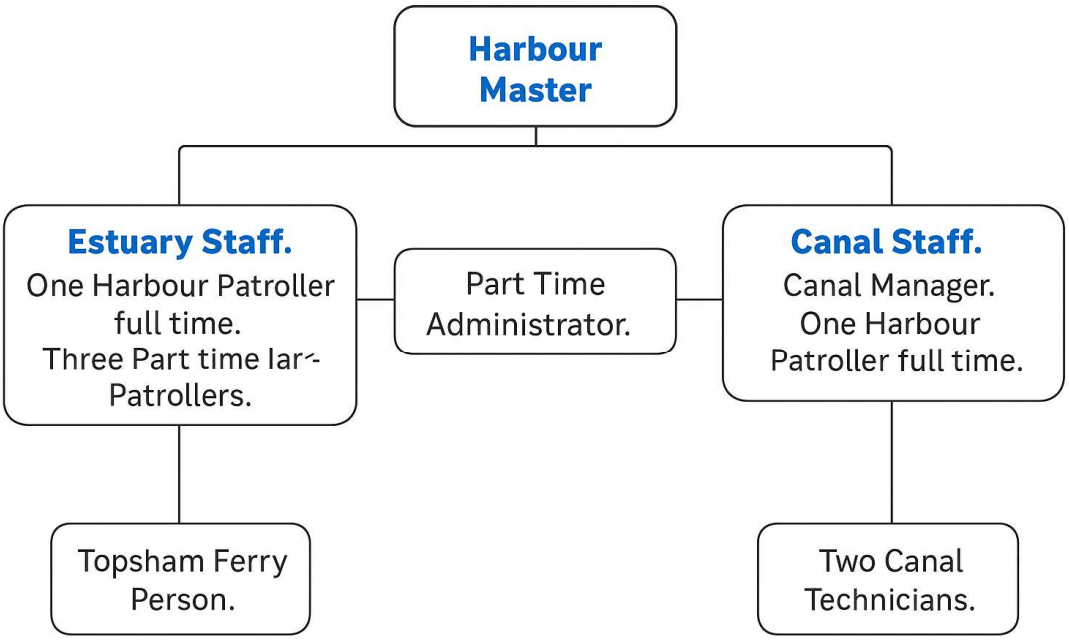
- ✓ We will take responsibility for ensuring safe and well-managed waterways, supporting healthy, inclusive communities and contributing to wider wellbeing goals.
- ✓ We will promote access to waterways and encourage active, healthy lifestyles, recognising the role of culture, recreation and outdoor activity in improving quality of life and supporting local economies.
- ✓ We will demonstrate strong environmental stewardship, contributing to sustainable environmental outcomes and working towards a pathway to net-zero emissions.
- ✓ We will engage proactively and constructively with stakeholders, fostering collaboration consistent with Exeter City Council corporate plan's emphasis on partnership working

- ✓ We will deliver value-for-money, efficient services, focusing resources on priority areas and operating sustainably in a challenging financial climate.
- ✓ We will enact good governance and act with integrity.

Our Team

We have a dedicated team of 9.5 full-time equivalent staff who deliver the day-to-day operational running of the harbour and canal. Although small, our team is highly skilled and carries out the essential work that keeps the waterways safe, welcoming and well managed for all users. As part of Exeter City Council's Operations service, we work closely with other teams that support the city's public spaces and infrastructure, ensuring a joined-up approach to customer service and safety across the wider area.

Our staff are committed to providing reliable, high-quality services that help the harbour operate smoothly throughout the year. As expectations around safety, regulation and customer experience evolve, we are building a flexible and resilient structure so we can continue to adapt, improve and meet future needs. This approach ensures the harbour and canal remain enjoyable, safe and accessible places for everyone who lives, works or spends leisure time on the water.



Volunteers

We have a team of eight volunteers who assist with harbour patrols on the estuary from April through to the end of September each year. We cannot underestimate the significant contribution they make to the harbour team; their support is invaluable in helping to educate water users and uphold the Bye Laws on the Estuary. Collectively, their efforts equate to approximately 200 hours of additional resource each year, greatly enhancing our operational capacity during the busiest months.

Key Stakeholders

Alongside our staff and the many communities who use and enjoy the estuary and canal, we recognise that we work within a much wider network of essential stakeholders. These include the emergency services and specialist responders such as the RNLI and our tier-2 pollution contractor; national bodies with statutory roles such as Trinity House, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the Marine Management Organisation, the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority, and the UK Hydrographic Office; and key local partners including the Exe Estuary Partnership and the Topsham River Commissioners. We also depend on the experience and commitment of yacht and sailing clubs, rowing and gig clubs, youth groups including the Scouts and Sea Cadets, as well as the many businesses and charitable organisations that operate on and around the canal and estuary. Together, they form an essential part of the collaborative management of our waterways.

Conservancy and Safety

Exeter's harbour, estuary and historic Ship Canal are cared for, so that everyone who uses them can do so safely and enjoyably, while safeguarding these unique waterways for the future. As the Statutory Harbour Authority, Exeter City Council has a clear responsibility to make sure our waters remain safe, navigable and well-managed. Conservancy describes all the work that keeps the estuary, harbour and canal in good order.

In Exeter, this includes:

Looking after our navigation channels
We regularly survey the riverbed and canal to understand how conditions change, especially after storms and tides. These surveys help us mark safe channels, guide users and plan maintenance where it's needed. Hydrographic information is shared with the UK Hydrographic Office and local mariners through Notices to Mariners.

Maintaining buoys, beacons and lights
Navigation marks across the estuary and canal are looked after by the Harbour Authority and inspected to national standards. We work closely with Trinity House, who provide oversight of local Aids to Navigation. This helps everyone — from paddleboarders to commercial operators — understand where it is safe to travel.

Dredging and depth management
Where necessary, we monitor and maintain charted depths so that vessels can navigate safely. The estuary is a naturally shifting environment, and this work helps ensure safe access for leisure and operational vessels alike.

Clear, timely communication
Safety information is shared through Local Notices to Mariners, VHF broadcasts, the Exeter Port Authority website and the Exe Estuary Management Partnership. Users are encouraged to report hazards and incidents so that we can respond quickly and keep our waterways safe.

Harbour byelaws, directions and local rules
Byelaws and harbour directions (as they are introduced through modernised powers) help manage safe navigation, considerate behaviour and fair access for everyone. These rules help reduce conflict and keep activity organised across the estuary and canal.

Emergency planning and response
We work with partners including the Coastguard, the Environment Agency and emergency services to prepare for incidents. The Harbour Authority maintains emergency and oil-spill plans and regularly reviews risk across the harbour and canal.

Wrecks, debris and obstructions
If a wreck or obstruction appears in the waterway, we assess the risk it poses and where necessary take action to make the area safe. This may include marking the hazard, restricting access or arranging removal where appropriate.

Maritime conservancy is a statutory duty that ensures the estuary, harbour and canal remain properly maintained, navigable and free from obstruction. Much of this essential work takes place quietly and out of sight, surveying channels, maintaining navigation marks, clearing hazards, monitoring changing conditions and responding to issues before they affect users.

Because of this continuous, often unseen effort, people are able to enjoy the waterway unhindered.

The Harbour Master and the Harbour Team carry out these day-to-day responsibilities, applying their specialist skills and local knowledge to meet national conservancy requirements and uphold harbour legislation. Their work provides the foundation that keeps the waterway functioning, reliable and ready for all who depend on it.

Key Objectives

1. Promote and Enable Positive Use of the Port and Canal

We will make the Port and Canal, welcoming, and accessible by:

- Provide a positive experience for all users
- Foster a sustainable environment
- Maintain and develop meaningful consultation with stakeholders
- Collaborate and strengthen local partnerships

2. Continually Improve Safety On and Off the Water

We will maintain a consistently high standard of marine and occupational safety across the estuary, canal, harbour and operations by:

- Maintain compliance with legislation, Codes and best practice
- Deliver the Port Marine Safety System
- Maintain aids to navigation to Trinity House standards
- Implement the Harbour Revision Order
- Establish and maintain a robust Marine Safety Management System
- Share accurate navigational and safety information.

3. Strengthen Financial Sustainability and Governance

We will ensure the long-term resilience of harbour operations by: -

- Manage finances prudently and plan for long-term obligations
- Modernise business activities and diversify income
- Improve transparency between income and operating costs
- Secure external funding opportunities

4. Establish a Comprehensive Waterways Asset Management Framework

- Design and implement a comprehensive Waterways Asset Management Framework that prioritises maintenance and capital delivery programme for operational assets, strengthening r financial planning, and improving the safety, accessibility and long-term resilience of the estuary, harbour and canal-term resilience of the estuary, harbour and canal.

Harbour Infrastructure and Assets

The Port of Exeter includes a wide range of vessels, pontoons, plant, equipment and harbour premises that support safe and efficient operations across the estuary, river and historic Ship Canal. Exeter City Council is responsible for all port premises, including docks, quays, wharves, berths, slipways, bridges, landing places, buildings, workshops, storage areas, car parks and other operational land identified in the Port Premises Plan. The Council also manages the wet port area, which incorporates the Estuary, River and Canal, together with the associated fundus and foreshore within the defined port limits. These areas include the bed, banks and adjoining land below high water that support navigation, moorings, aids to navigation, dredging operations and the laying of pontoons, piles and other structures essential to the safe and effective operation of the harbour and canal.

Initiatives in Flight

Harbour Revision Order:

The Council is progressing a Harbour Revision Order (HRO) to ensure that the Port of Exeter is managed using clear, modern and fit-for-purpose powers. Much of the existing legislation is historic and no longer reflects how the estuary and canal are used today. By updating these powers, we can create a safer, more consistent and better-regulated environment for all water users.

The HRO will help us deliver a harbour that is easier to navigate, fairer to use and more resilient for the future. It will support the continued safe operation of the Port and give customers greater confidence in how activities on the water are managed.

What the Harbour Revision Order Will Achieve

- Modern, Up-to-date Regulations: Replaces outdated legislation with a clear and contemporary legal framework suited to today's patterns of leisure, commercial and heritage use.
- Improved Management of Moorings and Navigation: Provides the Authority with the right tools to manage moorings, water-based activity and navigation risks consistently and safely.
- Clearer Guidance for Users: Ensures that water users, visitors and businesses receive clear, transparent rules that support safe and enjoyable use of the estuary and canal.
- Long-term Sustainability: Strengthens the overall resilience of the Port, supporting better planning, safer operations and a well-managed waterway for future generations.

Commercial Business

Exeter's harbour, estuary and historic Ship Canal support a small but diverse range of commercial operations that contribute to the local economy and help fund the safe management of our waterways. Activities are focused on providing marine services, supporting local operators and maintaining essential infrastructure. These include:

- Service and maintenance of navigation marks for National Grid and other partners.
- Moorings provision, including installation, service and inspection.
- Rental of moorings, alongside berths and pontoon berths for local and visiting vessels.
- Visitor moorings are managed by Exeter Port Authority.
- Deployment and maintenance of swim area buoys at Sidmouth and Budleigh, and zone buoys marking activity areas.
- Boat storage and lifting services on the canal (on-the-hard storage, lift in/out).
- Operation of the Topsham Ferry, providing a seasonal passenger link across the estuary.
- RYA-accredited training, offering practical skills development for water users.

Picture: Craning of vessels at Exeter Quay

We also recognise that there are further valuable opportunities that can strengthen income and enhance the sustainability of harbour operations. Over the life of the **2026–28 Business Plan**, we will continue to explore additional options that can help support the delivery of a safe harbour and contribute to covering the cost of maintaining a busy and important leisure and commercial waterway.

Harbour Operational Budget 2024/25

ECC - WATERWAYS
2024/25

Expenditure	**£**
Employee Related	446,547
Premises	206,035
Supplies & Services	99,707
Transport	84,988
Internal Recharges	9,086
	846,363
Income	**£**
Rents received	(53,134)
Mooring/Storage Fees	(159,227)
Canal Fees	(160,785)
Misc Income	(17,476)
	(390,623)
Deficit Funded by General Fund	455,741

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