

REPORT TO CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 19th March 2026

PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S REPORT TO SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

COUNCILLOR BOB FOALE – ARTS, CULTURE & TOURISM

1. Issues relating to achieving the Council's published priorities
None
2. Update or commentary on any major ongoing programmes of work
Cultural Strategy Work is underway to develop a new Culture Strategy for the next 5 years. The revised programme is as follows: Executive Report 28 April 2026, to approve draft Strategy & Action Plan for public consultation Online consultation runs from 11 May – 22 June 2026 Executive report 18 August 2026, to endorse Cultural Strategy & Action Plan Council meeting 8 September 2026, to adopt Cultural Strategy & Action Plan
Royal Albert Memorial Museum Report The Council's Museum Accreditation return was submitted to Arts Council England (ACE) in February. The Museum Accreditation Scheme is the UK industry standard for the governance and operation of museums and galleries. Accreditation is necessary in securing major investment from ACE and most other sector funding bodies. An independent review of RAMM's operating model undertaken in 2025, recommended that the museum develop an approach that will focus on increasing alternative funding sources and increasing the museum's commercial acumen and income generating capabilities without diluting its reputation for cultural and heritage expertise. The report also recommended changes to the museum's management structure. The Council has been awarded a grant from the Government's Museum Renewal Fund, of £114,202 to be used to improve RAMM's income-generating activities, including the shop, cafe and retail website. The marketing campaign to promote the RAMM shop at Christmas resulted in the best-performing December on record in the RAMM shop, with a 20% increase in shop takings and seven-fold increase in online sales. The museum was subject to a major theft of objects last year and unfortunately, the objects have not been recovered. A visit on behalf of the national security advisor has taken place and has confirmed there is no lasting impact. RAMM achieved an outstanding result in its VAQAS (Visitor Attraction Quality Assessment Scheme) assessment, run by Visit England. It improved on its previous score to record an overall mark of 87%. Among the top scores were Pre-

arrival (online presence) and Retail which both were rated at 100%, and the quality of the attraction which was marked at 91%.

In July, RAMM acquired an Anglo-Saxon silver penny; an important object which marks the beginning of modern Exeter. The RAMM café re-opened in 2025 after a long period of closure.

The Grayson Perry: Aspects of Myself exhibition opened on 24 January and has proven to be very popular, with 4,452 tickets sold (income of £22,761) in the first two weeks.

RAMM's contemporary art commission, Charmaine Watkiss's for the Ones Who Came Before has also appeared in the [national press](#). This commission reflects on the legacies of race and colonialism within western museum collections.

Exeter Corn Exchange & Exeter Tickets

Corn Exchange

In the first half of the financial year the performance of Corn Exchange box office programme is slightly improved compared to the same period last year despite ongoing exterior works and increased reports of anti-social behaviour in the area around the venue.

Occupancy numbers remain consistent, but the percentage of shows sold out, and number of Corn Exchange sales have both increased slightly.

Digital audience engagement remains very high with minimum open rates of 55% and subscriber numbers stable at 30,000 despite filtering out consistently non-engaged customers.

The programme going forward continues to be extremely strong for a venue of this size and we expect the ratio of box office shows to community hires to remain consistent in 2026.

Exeter Tickets

Exeter Tickets is expected to perform significantly (175%) better than budget this year. This is largely due to the success of partner events like Exeter Comedy Festival and Powderham Presents.

Visit Exeter

The 2024 Visitor Volume and Value Data has just been published for 2024.

- UK trips: 306,000 (decrease of 3% on 2023)
- UK trip spend: 67,970,000 (increase of 1% on 2023)
- Overseas trips: 46,000 (0% change on 2023)
- Overseas trip spend: £43,425,000 (increase of 9% on 2023)
- Day visits: 1,461,000 (decrease of 14% on 2023)
- Day visit spend: £82,588,000 (decrease of 8% on 2023)
- Total value of tourism to Exeter (staying plus day visitor spend plus other tourism related spend): £203,061,575

VFR (visiting friends & relatives) travel has decreased by 8% when comparing 2024 to 2022, so is a significant contributory factor to the decrease in trips. VFR often involves shorter stays, which are easier to skip when budgets tighten. Exeter's VFR segment is large (45% of stays), so any small behavioural change has a big impact.

Consumers are choosing fewer, higher-value holidays rather than multiple short trips.

Staying nights

Exeter performed well in 2023 and was one of the few areas in the UK with growth.

In 2024 Exeter is on par with national performance for staying visitor nights and fares slightly better than Devon County over the analysis period.

Staying spend

Positive growth for Exeter, but far behind national trend at 2%, versus 10% nationally. It still outperforms the rest of Devon

Breakdown of spend by sector – this has remained almost the same for the past 3 years:

	2024
Shopping	31%
Accommodation	19%
Food & drink	26%
Attractions/entertainment	10%
Travel	14%

Day visits

Exeter broadly in line with national for long-term trend, but sharp drop in 2024 due to strong 2023.

Day visit spend

Good growth since 2022, but national increase is stronger.

Positives and challenges

Positives:

- Staying spend up (+4% vs 2023).
- Staying nights grew in 2024 (+3%).
- Day visit spend still higher than 2022.

Challenges:

- Staying trips down sharply (-13% vs 2022).
- Day visits fell (-14% vs 2023).
- Underperformance vs national spend growth

Visit Exeter's digital reach increased in 2025:

- >3 million Facebook reach

- Facebook engagement increased by 77% on 2024
- 122k Instagram reach, up by 57% on 2024
- >1.1 million website views

Visitor Facilities

Visitor numbers to the Custom House have increased by 15% on the previous year despite changing weather conditions and major projects, relocating the reception, specialist restoration of the vacated room and its repurposing as a temporary gallery space. Exploratory work growing new commercially focused partnerships and events have generated over 60% increase in income. Notable events include ambient pop-up restaurant nights with local chefs and community partners, and the Christmas craft market.

Currently the SWHT are exhibiting their display relating to the 'Isca Photographic Collection'. The exhibition has been well received by visitors. In March there is an exhibition of photographs in collaboration with Exeter Chief's player Olly Woodburn.

The underground passages were subject to substantial further flooding, the recent occasions due to new occurrences of burst water mains. Strong relationships with South West Water are leading to fast resolutions. Permissions are currently being sought for much needed remedial conservation masonry works, with discussion focused around SPAB principles in preservation. To support preservation efforts corporate property teams worked closely with passages teams and a local specialist surveyor. The outcome being state of the art 3D laser scanning providing unprecedented visibility of the subterranean passages, their construction, depth and exact location within the city centre. A substantial in depth training programme to provide new Red Coats Guides began this year.

3. Issues that may impact: services delivery/financial performance/future budget requirements

The service redesign will result in savings year on year.

4. Potential changes to services/provisions being considered

The restructure of the cultural managers is now complete. This process involved the deletion of the following posts:

RAMM Operations Manager
 RAMM Audience Development Manager
 RAMM Collections & Content Manager
 RAMM Conservation & Support Services Manager
 Facilities Manager
 Corn Exchange Manager

And the creation of the following new posts:

General Manager Culture
 Culture Facilities & Programming Manager
 Museum Manager

5. Other matters the Portfolio Holder wishes to raise with the Scrutiny Committee

City of Culture

The Council submitted an Expression of Interest (EOI) to government for UK City of Culture 2029. An announcement is expected in the spring.