

Lord Mayor

The balanced budget we present tonight has been achieved through good financial management and a focus on priorities, service efficiencies and sustainable income streams.

In setting this budget, we continue to rise to the challenge of maintaining those statutory services we are obliged to deliver, and those discretionary services that we choose to deliver here in Exeter.

As usual, extensive consultation has taken place to ensure that our identified priorities match those of our residents and communities as well as those who visit or work in Exeter.

We have listened and taken account of what residents told us was important to them.

After years of tough and difficult decisions, we are in an enviable position of not having to cut frontline services for the next two years – the remaining life of this council.

This year's budget is of course set against a backdrop of major change.

Over the last year we have built a powerful case for a new unitary authority which includes the city of Exeter at its heart.

Our case was developed after extensive consultation and with cross-party support, and I thank all councillors for their collaboration on this.

Our proposal, and those from other authorities in Devon, is currently out to public consultation, and I would urge people to have their say by taking part in the online consultation.

Local Government Reorganisation provides a fantastic opportunity for Exeter to continue to thrive in the future, just as it has in the past.

The Centre for Cities named Exeter as the fastest growing city in the UK, with significant housing and investment plans for the region.

According to Centre for Cities, Exeter's population grew by more than 15 per cent between 2014-2024 – the highest of any city in the country.

The city is also in the top 10 for:

- Numbers of pupils with GCSEs Maths and English grades 9-4.

- The recent increase in the city's housing stock

Lord Mayor

At the end of last year, the Minister wrote to me to ask whether postponing this coming May's election would assist in the efficient delivery of local government reorganisation.

Having listened to a lengthy and passionate debate at Council I concluded that a postponement would assist that process.

Having recently seen the huge number of workstreams planned and the massive task of preparing for a new unitary council - whatever that looks like – the points I made to the minister in my opinion remain valid.

But the Minister has said that on reflection the elections should be held in May.

And given the number of representations we had - and how divisive this issue became - I think the decision is no bad thing.

We have been pledged extra resources from the Government to prepare for local government reorganisation and that addresses concerns around the capacity to deliver, and I await this support.

I am glad this has brought a resolution to the situation, and everyone will get the chance to have their say in May, and I hope we can all now focus on the issues that impact on our residents.

Lord Mayor

It is very important not to lose focus on the work to build a new unitary council for Exeter and the surrounding area - that remains the big goal that we all want to see.

We have a great team of officers in Electoral Services, led by the Chief Executive, who will work extremely hard to facilitate the elections, as they always do - I have no doubt they will deliver.

We will be ready, and we will be defending our record of achievement in Exeter.

Over the last year we have continued to deliver excellent services for the residents of our city.

If I may Lord Mayor, I want to briefly highlight some of our achievements before coming on to the details of the budget.

Our Community Safety Team was recently made permanent and expanded to cover the rest of the city, including parks, neighbourhood shopping areas and cemeteries, with new posts created to improve our visibility in the city.

This will help to further drive down anti-social behaviour.

I say further drive down, because comparing 2024 to 2025, the figures show anti-social behaviour reduced by 21.9%.

All recorded crime in the city centre reduced by 11.6% over the same period.

A lot of investment has gone into improving our CCTV coverage – with 311 high-definition cameras across the city centre now linked to our Control Room.

This deters crime and assists the police in finding perpetrators when crime does take place.

Additional CCTV cameras are planned in the next financial year.

A new Safety Charter for the city centre is being developed and will be launched this spring to support city centre community safety.

Exeter City Centre was recently given a Purple Flag Award - a mark of excellence for a safe, well-managed and vibrant evening economy.

Led by InExeter, this award recognised the work that has taken place to make Exeter a safe and welcoming place for all. I would like to thank all those organisations that work to support this.

The Safety of Women and Girls at Night Charter is currently being reviewed and will be relaunched in the summer.

A new City Centre Strategy has been developed and will go out to consultation in the summer.

The results of the 2025 Residents' Survey played an important role in the development of the strategy.

It focuses on the appearance of the city centre, safety and accessibility, developing a vibrant economy, building new homes and how people travel to get there.

The strategy is owned and led by the city council and will be delivered in partnership with businesses and partners.

Lord Mayor

We continue to support residents struggling with the high cost of living.

The Benefits and Welfare Team have helped distribute funding to low-income households as part of the Household Support Scheme during 2025/2026.

£526,300 has been awarded to 4,848 households during this latest scheme.

It provided:

2,673 awards - totalling £267,300 - to low-income pensioner households in autumn 2025, as energy bills began to rise.

2,175 awards - totalling £259,000 - to low-income working age households struggling with ongoing high cost of living.

We continue to support community groups directly through our grants programme.

We continue to support Citizens Advice Exeter, and while we cannot provide a transitional grant for 2026/2027, we remain committed to ensuring that residents have access to effective, high-quality advice and support.

We hope the continuation of the peppercorn rent and forthcoming commissioning opportunities under the national Crisis Resilience Fund will assist the organisation in planning for the future.

Lord Mayor

Housing remains one of our key strategic priorities.

The Exeter Plan – our new Local Plan - has been submitted and is now progressing to examination hearings.

This is a major milestone that will guide sustainable housing, regeneration, climate action and infrastructure planning for the next 20 years.

The second development phase of the council's housing development at Vaughan Road is set to commence shortly - 16 new apartments which will be constructed by June 2027.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting the first tenants to move into the council's 35 new Passivhaus apartments at Vaughan Road.

This development is fantastic and is changing people's lives.

You don't have to take my word for it.

Here's what resident Tom Hannaford, a former tenant of Rennes House, said after moving in with Christine, his wife of 60 years.

"We were the first ones in, and our new home is really lovely. We are so happy. There's no way you're going to get better than this – we love it."

Lord Mayor

Work is starting in St Thomas where seven more non-traditionally built council properties are being demolished and replaced with new family homes.

Our programme of retrofitting council properties to cut bills for residents as well as reducing carbon emissions continues.

Last year 152 council properties were retrofitted, bringing the total in the city to 1,250.

We are working with partners to create 100 much-needed new social housing units on land off Pendragon Road.

Exeter remains a vibrant and fast-growing city.

Our city development team determined 1,350 planning and related applications, and 52 enforcement cases were closed during 2025.

182 affordable homes were secured through Section 106 agreements, supporting the delivery of much-needed housing across the city.

Major progress has been made at Water Lane, where approvals for up to 980 homes, student accommodation and commercial space will help create a new community on a brownfield site.

Regeneration is taking place along the Heavitree Road corridor, with schemes delivering more than 800 student and co-living units bringing new investment and activity to an important route into the city and supporting local services.

Delivery is continuing at Exmouth Junction, including 100% affordable homes in Phase 2, with the scheme set to provide around 540 new homes in total.

When it comes to HMOs, Executive will look at the current regulations around licensing and consider proposals for what changes may be possible, and to ensure that this service breaks even.

Lord Mayor

Exeter has continued its steady reduction towards net zero, with total city-wide greenhouse gas emissions in Exeter for 2023 - the year with most recent data available - reducing by an estimated 8% compared to the previous year.

Through working in partnership with Sport England, we are soon to begin delivery of the Newtown community scheme.

Works will begin in March to improve cycling and walking infrastructure in the Triangle Car Park and onwards through the neighbourhood, past Belmont Park and Clifton Hill.

There has been significant local community engagement and partnership working with a large number of stakeholders to bring this active travel scheme forward.

An action plan that focuses on adaptation and resilience will provide Exeter City Council, and the new unitary authority that replaces it, with a document on how to adapt to the impact of climate on our services, residents and business community.

This will include incidents such as flooding, extreme heat, food resilience, land and water, and infrastructure.

At present, the City Council has limited resources to focus on existing city-wide net zero activity.

If we focus on adaptation as well, it will require a change of focus. Shifting focus to adaptation, would require significant investment, which only the new authority could make.

Lord Mayor

The renewal of the historic Royal Clarence is underway, with new homes and commercial space helping to secure a long-term future for this landmark site.

Permission has been granted for the new Wonford Community and Learning Centre, supporting improved community, learning and wellbeing facilities for residents.

As well as investing in the future we also invest in the past.

Work on repairing the City Wall at City Gate was recently completed at a cost of around £480,000, demonstrating our commitment to protecting the historic fabric of our city.

Turning to our Community Asset Transfer (CAT) policy - which was agreed in 2022 - I have been approached with suggestions and that there are concerns over inconsistent handling of requests, and transparency around asset disposal.

There are areas that can be reviewed and issues that can be resolved under the current policy, many of which would not require formal policy change, but may require resources and time investment from officers.

Therefore, I have asked the Chief Executive to examine the policy and bring forward improvements to a future Executive.

Lord Mayor

We continue to invest in maintaining and improving our car parks in the city.

Work is planned to refurbish the Cathedral & Quay car park enabling all five decks to be utilised.

The Guildhall car park will also be refurbished to provide a better experience for users.

Lord Mayor

I'm also very happy to report that there are no increases in car parking charges planned in the next financial year.

We continue to invest heavily in our leisure service to improve health and wellbeing and quality of life for our residents.

Last year we hosted seven games of the highly successful Women's Rugby World Cup in Exeter.

It was a brilliant showcase for the city - and leaves a legacy of participation in sport, particularly among women and girls.

New figures released this week show that directly boosted the economy in Exeter by more than £30 million.

I want to thank all those involved in delivering it.

Our Leisure Service goes from strength to strength.

There are 13,646 active Exeter Leisure members – a 16 per cent increase on last year.

Last year there were 64,429 casual users – a 20 per cent increase on the previous year.

Over the past year we welcomed more than 95,000 group exercise participants and more than 800,000 swimmers.

Our dedicated Exeter Leisure staff taught more than 2,000 children to swim at St Sidwell's Point and Riverside last year.

Our GP Referral Scheme has delivered more than 1,600 sessions to some of our most vulnerable residents in Exeter and surrounding areas.

Lord Mayor

We recently submitted a bid for Exeter to become UK City of Culture 2029.

The bid emerged from the months of consultation work carried out with the sector in the city to develop the city's new Cultural Strategy.

Exeter continues to be a UNESCO City of Literature and has five National Portfolio Organisations supported.

Cultural facilities in the city – including the council’s own Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Corn Exchange – continue to thrive.

Our annual Residents’ Survey recently revealed that 86 per cent of residents had participated in Exeter’s cultural scene over the past 12 months.

Talking of our annual Residents’ Survey, figures for 2025 show more than 80 per cent said they were satisfied with their local area as a place to live.

Other key findings include:

50 per cent are satisfied with how the council runs things – the same as last year

40 per cent agree the council provides value for money – up on the previous year and above the national average

52 per cent think the Council keeps them well-informed – up on the previous last year and above the national average

60 per cent trust the council a great deal or fair amount – up on the previous year and well above the national average

Satisfaction levels with council services were similar to the previous year – with sport and leisure services, parks and green spaces, social housing landlord services, homeless prevention and museums and visitor attractions all showing an increase.

Top reasons why Exeter is special were:

- Independent outlets
- The Quay
- History and heritage
- Green spaces and parks

Our dedicated council staff put a lot of effort into making sure the city always looks its best and it is very satisfying to know this is appreciated by our residents.

In 2025 a total of 6,700 residents took part in council consultations - something we are very proud of.

Lord Mayor

Our operations team had another busy year.

99.9% of waste was collected successfully.

Food waste collections were rolled out to around 44,000 homes, with the remaining properties expected to be completed shortly.

629 cases of graffiti were cleaned up.

799 trees were planted.

877 noise complaints were investigated.

Our parks and green spaces continue to be maintained to a very high standard.

Our rolling programme of improvements to play areas in the city continues, and some major improvements took place last year, including at Exwick Station Road.

We continue to invest in Exeter's popular water play facilities - the much-loved paddling pools at Heavitree Pleasure Ground and the St Thomas Splash Pad.

The Heavitree Pool redevelopment is expected to start this year and will create major improvements at this popular site.

Collaboration with our partners is leading to major improvements in community sports facilities across the city.

This includes Exeter's College's work at Flowerpots and Exeter City Community Trust's plans for major improvements at King George V.

Lord Mayor - we continue to invest in the future.

Council recently approved ambitious plans to purchase a new Materials Reclamation Facility and relocate key operational services.

The aim is to drive regeneration, improve frontline services and secure long-term financial and environmental benefits.

The creation of a modern waste and operations hub at Exton Road will be a major boost to the city's recycling operation.

Our planned office relocation to Senate Court – modern offices which the Council already owns - is a major investment in the city centre.

It will also enable the CityPoint redevelopment – a 1,000 unit residential-led mixed use scheme on council-owned land covering the Civic Centre and former bus station sites.

Thank you, Lord Mayor, for allowing me to highlight some of the things we do so well here in Exeter, and I now come on to the details of the budget itself.

For the first time in a decade, the Government have provided Councils with a multi-year settlement, providing stability and certainty over the funding available for the next three years.

This year we will receive the same amount of funding as we did in 2025-26.

Despite everything we do as a local authority, Exeter continues to set one of the lowest Council Tax rates in the country.

The proposed band D council tax for 2026/27 is £191.31 which means that our share of the council tax will increase by 2.99 per cent or £5.55 a year – around 11p a week.

In setting this budget tonight, the aggregate requirements of Exeter City Council, Devon County Council, Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner Devon and Cornwall, and the Devon and Somerset Fire Authority will result in a Council Tax for the City of Exeter for 2025/26 of: £2,495.36 per Band D property, an overall increase of £109.91 or 5.01%.

The breakdown of this charge is:

Devon County Council - £1,891.17

Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner - £303.20

Exeter City Council - £191.31

Devon and Somerset Fire Authority - £109.68

This equals a total of £2,495.36, of which the Exeter City Council share is 7.6% of that bill.

I'll repeat, our share of the Council Tax is increasing by around 11p a week.

I think that it is pretty good value for a city which does so much, as I highlighted earlier, and we will continue to ensure that we provide the very best services we can for the benefit of everyone in Exeter.

As I stated at the beginning, after years of tough and difficult decisions, we are in an enviable position of not having to cut services for the remaining life of this council.

Lord Mayor, I covered a lot of things tonight, but that's not all.

A new temporary fund will be created to enable residents and community groups in Exeter to improve their neighbourhoods.

The council is putting £130,000 into Pride in Exeter – the equivalent of £10,000 for every ward in the city – to be spent on tidying, cleaning and improving neighbourhoods.

Exeter is already a clean and tidy city, but with more resources there's always more than can be done, where local communities request it.

Residents and community groups will be encouraged to apply for things like fixing broken fences, clearing overgrown spaces, removing excessive weeds and general small repairs and tidying.

The work will be carried out by our dedicated teams at the council, in conjunction with community groups where appropriate.

The process will be similar to applying for ward grants and we will work with all ward councillors, community builders and groups on this.

This extra resource is in addition to all the usual cleansing operations the council carries out – it is extra resource for non-essential but important work that improves the quality of life for residents in our communities.

It is about having pride in our city, to ensure that Exeter continues to look the best it can be.

I believe I have addressed many of issues previously raised by the parties opposite and hope we can now work together to take the city forward.

Lord Mayor

An Additional Recommendation:

On 27 January 2026 the Licensing Committee

RESOLVED unanimously that the Licensing Committee recommends the following:

That Council approves for the period from 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2027 that the fees shall be set as specified in Appendix B.

Minutes of the above meeting have been published and will be received by Council on 3 March, but these fees can be found on pages 228-230 of the agenda pack and form part of the budget before you today.

Lord Mayor

The following amendment to the resolution is made:

That the following, as submitted, be approved:

(a) the Revenue estimates for 2026-2027 with an additional budget added of £130,000 for tidying, cleaning and improving the public realm, to be funded from the General Fund Working Balance;

Lord Mayor

We will be able to demonstrate to a new unitary authority the legacy of a well-run council, with serious, sensible and well-argued projects backed up with strong business cases, like the bus station redevelopment, MRF expansion and new Wonford community hub.

We said we would:

- Support residents through the cost of living
- Lead on climate action
- Build more council homes
- Protect green spaces
- Invest in culture and leisure
- Run a stable, well led council

This budget addresses these points and over two consecutive years, we have delivered on those commitments.

Our legacy will be handing over this authority in a sound way.

Under our leadership Exeter has thrived in the past, and I know that it will continue to thrive in the future.

Lord Mayor, I move!