

## **EXECUTIVE**

Tuesday 17 March 2026

Present:

Councillor Bialyk (Chair)

Councillors Wright, Asvachin, Foale, Patrick, Vizard, Williams, R and Wood

Also present:

Councillor Haigh (as an opposition group Leader);

Councillor Holland (as an opposition group Leader);

Councillor M. Mitchell (as an opposition group Leader);

Councillor Moore (as an opposition group Leader); and

Councillor Payne (as an opposition group Leader).

Also present:

Chief Executive, Strategic Director for Place, Head of Service - Finance, Head of Service - HR, Workforce Planning and Organisational Development, Benefits & Welfare Lead, Head of Service - Customers and Communities, Head of Service - City Centre and Net Zero, Head of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer and Democratic Services Officer

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### **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 3 February 2025, were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

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### **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests were made.

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### **QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER NO. 19**

No questions from members of the public were received.

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### **MATTERS REFERRED BY SCRUTINY COMMITTEES**

There were no matters referred from the Scrutiny Committees for this meeting.

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### **LORD MAYORALTY**

The Leader proposed, and Councillor Wright seconded, that Councillor Gemma Rolstone be nominated as Lord Mayor Elect for the 2026/27 Municipal Council year, and that Councillor Lucy Haigh be nominated as the Deputy Lord Mayor Elect for the 2026/27 Municipal Year.

**RESOLVED** that Councillor Gemma Rolstone be nominated as Lord Mayor Elect for the 2026/27 Municipal Year and that Councillor Lucy Haigh be nominated as the Deputy Lord Mayor Elect for the 2026/27 Municipal Year.

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### **EXETER CITY COUNCIL'S CARBON REDUCTION PLAN**

The Executive received the report which summarised the Council's response to research undertaken by the University of Exeter, which for the first time estimated

the full cost of carbon emissions across its services. Using this, the Council had developed a carbon reduction plan. Particular points raised included:

- the plan showed positive current trajectory measures in line with the recommendations and included business as usual measures to reduce greenhouse emissions which had been built into all service delivery plans for all Council services;
- known costs, were included and each action had performance metrics for monitoring progress;
- additional mid-term and maximum scenario measures had been incorporated;
- some projects were currently unfunded but had been included to demonstrate ambitions, if funding became available;
- there were funding constraints highlighted as a key challenge to delivery;
- there were seven service areas covered, with housing, buildings, and transport identified as having the highest impact;
- the Carbon Action Plan would be a live document, which would be reviewed and updated every six months, with regular progress reports submitted to the Strategic Scrutiny Committee every six months, starting in June 2026; and
- numerous projects had already been completed or were underway, with a full list included in the report and appendix.

During the discussion, Executive Members raised the following points and Questions:

- the high-quality work undertaken was commended;
- the contribution of the South West Energy and Environment Group and partnerships with other local authorities was important;
- the report was pioneering in estimating Council-wide carbon impacts;
- the service-wide approach and inclusion of measurable metrics to track progress was welcomed;
- the range of projects underway, included the Riverside initiatives and retrofitting of Council properties were highlighted;
- the overall direction of travel, showed how the Council was on a positive trajectory;
- additional funding would be required to go further;
- further detail from Strategic Directors and Service Leads on funding challenges would be required for future projects;
- the Portfolio Holder for Climate, Ecological Change and Communities indicated his intention to engage with the local MP's and government ministers regarding funding opportunities, which would be carried forward as an action arising from the report;
- the report helped bridge the gap between ambition and delivery, providing a clear roadmap and outlined challenges;
- the Council had set a challenging target and was working towards it;
- the Portfolio Holder for Leisure Services & Healthy Living highlighted the progress made within the leisure portfolio, including St. Sidwell's Point which demonstrated strong carbon reduction performance;
- improvements at Riverside leisure centre, included energy efficiency works and an ongoing funded roof project and further opportunities, including heat recovery and solar panels were highlighted;
- upcoming works at Wonford were referenced and clarification was sought on associated environmental benefits and carbon savings;
- the Isca Centre was noted as a site with potential for future carbon reduction improvements;

- the report was clear, accessible, and a helpful summary of current and future actions;
- some items marked red including procurement data investigation could be reclassified as amber to better reflect progress;
- the impact assessment was commended for clearly highlighting positive benefits for residents and communities; and
- the importance of the plan's real-world benefits was highlighted, including reduced fuel bills, improved wellbeing, and better health outcomes for residents.

The Leader noted importance of wider assets and referenced risks seen elsewhere, such as Councils considering museum closures. He highlighted the alignment with the corporate plan and planning policy, particularly around housing retrofitting and welcomed the local development of 92 homes with 35% affordable housing using heat source systems instead of gas.

In response to questions raised by Executive Members, the Strategic Director for Place advised that:

- an example of a cost challenge would be in fully converting all Council homes from gas boilers to air source heat pumps (maximum scenario) would cost approximately £51 million;
- this transition would significantly reduce carbon emissions but could increase short-term energy costs for residents;
- the long-term ambition was for more sustainable and ultimately cost-effective heating solutions;
- the benefits of external funding, citing Riverside as an example was where government funding enabled roof replacement and installation of solar panels;
- the importance of identifying and bidding for available funding opportunities was highlighted;
- the carbon reduction measures would be considered in all future capital projects, including Wonford, with further details coming in a forthcoming Council report;
- he clarified that "red" ratings in the action plan indicated areas where work had not yet started, rather than severity or cost; and
- explained the RAG colour coding system: Red = not yet started, Amber = in progress, and Green = completed.

An opposition group leader raised the following points and questions:

- welcomed the report as helpful and informative but highlighted concern that RAG ratings may not reflect actual carbon reduction outcomes;
- highlighted the importance of procurement data in driving genuine environmental change;
- raised awareness of methane emissions from landfill sites as a relevant issue and the report may be missing consideration of greenhouse gas sources like methane;
- requested clarification on whether the RAG rating measures showed progress of KPI implementation or actual impact on greenhouse gas reduction;
- enquired how procurement data reporting linked to meaningful carbon reduction if responses did not reflect real change;
- enquired on the shift from electric vehicles to Hydrogenated Vegetable Oil (HVO) fuel for fleet, including reasons and environmental implications; and
- asked why methane emissions were not included in the report.

In response to questions raised by opposition Members, the Strategic Director for Place advised:

- the RAG ratings reflected progress of individual projects or initiatives, rather than their overall impact on carbon reduction;
- ratings were based on delivery status such as the number of homes retrofitted;
- measuring the actual carbon reduction impact would require a separate analysis;
- further detail on the shift to HVO fuel for vehicles would be provided at a later date but advised that electric vehicle transition remained a success, supported by solar-generated electricity; and
- HVO was being explored as an additional measure to further reduce emissions, with trials already underway.

The Leader moved the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Wright, voted upon, and CARRIED unanimously

**RESOLVED** that:

- (1) the Carbon Reduction Plan, as set out in Appendix A, be approved; and
- (2) the work undertaken to incorporate Positive Current Trajectory measures into Service Plans, and to align these with Corporate Plan outcomes and the Corporate Performance Dashboard, be noted.

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**ADOPTION OF REVISED NON-INFRASTRUCTURE HABITAT MITIGATION (SAMM) CONTRIBUTIONS**

The Executive received the report which sought approval to adopt a revised non-infrastructure habitat mitigation contributions (Strategic Access Management and Monitoring – SAMM) for residential development within the designated habitat mitigation zone. Particular reference was made to:

- the report presented measures to mitigate the impact of new housing developments in Exeter on sensitive wildlife habitats, with a focus on protecting the Exe Estuary and Pebblebed Heaths from increased recreational pressure;
- there were a range of measures, described as “non-infrastructure”, which included warden services and biodiversity monitoring;
- these actions formed part of a wider toolkit to preserve and manage habitats;
- partnership working with neighbouring District Councils, Devon County Council, and Devon Wildlife Trust was important in helping to preserve habitats;
- funding was collected via Section 106 agreements and was pooled across authorities through a shared governance structure; and
- there were many benefits for a coordinated, cross-boundary approach to habitat protection and highlighted the urgency to adopt the updated rates, as all other districts had done so, with implementation required by 1 April 2026.

During the discussion, Executive Members raised the following points and Questions:

- the importance of allowing public access to green spaces for wellbeing while ensuring environmental protection was highlighted;
- index-linked contributions to maintain funding stability without frequent revisions was supported;

- there was a need for collaboration with other Councils for planning, maintenance, and protection of natural environments and in safeguarding those habitats for current and future generations;
- funding administration was undertaken through the Habitat Regulations Executive Committee, represented by Exeter, East Devon, and Teignbridge Councils;
- the current model had been recognised by Natural England as good practice; and
- the Southeast Devon Wildlife Joint Habitat Site Mitigation Strategy 2024 was highlighted which detailed protections for the Exe Estuary, Dawlish Warren, and East Devon Pebblebed Heath.

The Leader moved the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Wright, voted upon, and CARRIED unanimously

**RESOLVED** that:

- (1) the revised Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) contributions be adopted for all qualifying residential planning applications received on or after 1 April 2026; and
- (2) delegated authority be granted to the Head of City Development, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder, to apply annual index-linking and publish updated contribution rates.

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### **DEVON LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGY**

The Executive considered a report regarding the publication of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for the geographical area covering Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, which was a legal requirement led by Devon County Council, with Exeter City Council acting as a supporting authority. Particular reference was made to:

- the recommendation sought agreement for the strategy to be published;
- the strategy mapped important habitats, species, and provided opportunities for biodiversity enhancement across Devon, including Exeter's valley parks;
- a public consultation was undertaken by Devon County Council and was considered positive;
- an interactive online GIS mapping platform had been developed to allow easy public access and exploration of biodiversity assets;
- the significance of Exeter's urban contributions to county-wide biodiversity and potential for biodiversity net gain (BNG) was highlighted;
- an all Member briefing had previously been held which showcased the website and explained its use with guidance from the county ecologist; and
- the strategy was an example of successful cross-council collaboration across Devon.

During the discussion, Executive Members raised the following points and Questions:

- it was enquired how the public would access the interactive Local Nature Recovery Strategy website and whether a link could be provided via the City Council website or directly to Devon's site; and
- what was the officer involvement in the working group and had they been engaged throughout the strategy's development?

The Leader having sought confirmation, advised that Exeter City Council could not make changes to the Strategy itself and was only in a position to endorse its publication.

An opposition group leader raised the following points and questions:

- raised concern over significant local nature depletion, both on land and in water and what was being done about this;
- identifying sites for Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) locally was important to improve nature in Exeter rather than elsewhere;
- highlighted the need for a connected network of habitats, not just isolated units, to enable wildlife to thrive;
- the reliance on developer contributions alone was insufficient and local biodiversity strategy needed to be developed, with clear, proactive actions involving the community; and
- the mapping tool was welcomed, but there was a need to translate priorities into actions to protect wildlife species.

The Leader clarified that the report was endorsing publication only and did not require the Council to take further action at this stage. He emphasised that the Council was not being asked to decide what it should be doing locally regarding biodiversity. Other processes existed for addressing the actions and concerns raised, and those should be directed to the Portfolio Holders Strategic Directors.

The Leader moved the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Wright, voted upon, and CARRIED unanimously.

**RECOMMENDED** that Council confirm its agreement, as a Supporting Authority, for Devon County Council, as the Responsible Authority, to publish the Devon Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

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### **CRISIS AND RESILIENCE FUND: HOUSING PAYMENTS AND CRISIS PAYMENTS**

The Executive received the report which sought agreement on the proposed policy for Housing Payments under the Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF) as part of the local government finance settlement. Particular reference was made to:

- the CRF had two objectives: providing financial support to those in crisis and helping residents build long-term financial resilience;
- the report focused on the first objective, which would deliver support through housing payments or crisis payments;
- it was intended to be put into effect from April 2026;
- the new housing payments policy was a rebranded version of the existing discretionary housing payment scheme, which maintained the current eligibility criteria;
- funding for housing payments would come directly to the Council and the crisis payment funding would be received from Devon County Council, pending confirmation of allocation;
- a recommendation sought to grant delegated powers to the Strategic Director for Corporate Resources, in consultation with the Leader, to approve the final Crisis Payment scheme once the funding allocation and agreement from Devon County Council had been confirmed;
- the new scheme was replacing the previous Household Support Fund arrangements, but with a greater focus on emergency crisis payments; and

- a recent Government announcement advised that additional £50 million funding was being made available to support families using oil for home heating, which would be incorporated into the crisis payment policy.

During the discussion, Executive Members raised the following points and Questions:

- the team was thanked for their work on bringing the report forward;
- enquired on the number of local homes using oil heating and the potential impact on Crisis and Resilience Fund allocations, noting the particular issue in rural areas;
- clarification was sought on the red indicators in the crisis payment application criteria, questioning whether there were different tiers of considerations;
- confirmation was sought on the additional government funding for households using oil would be included under the current recommendations and not require a separate approval; and
- did the Council now know the exact funding allocation from Devon County Council, noting uncertainty had complicated the policy development.

The Leader observed the impact of rising heating oil costs, noting prices had increased several times in a short period, potentially pushing households into crisis. He noted that many affected residents may not normally meet eligibility criteria for support, but sudden cost spikes created financial emergencies.

In response to questions raised by Executive Members, the Head of Service – Finance and the Benefits and Welfare Lead advised that:

- the £50 million government funding for households using oil would largely address rural areas, with limited impact in Exeter;
- census data from 2021 showed that 135 households in Exeter relied on heating oil, compared with 6,000 in East Devon and 4,500 in Teignbridge. This information would determine how Devon County allocated the £1.3 million for the region;
- the red indicators in the crisis payment policy reflected that the draft policy was still being finalised, which the delegated powers being sought would complete it;
- the recent government announcement on oil payments would be factored into the final Crisis Payment scheme and therefore covered under the current recommendations and would be incorporated into the final scheme through delegated powers, with no further committee approval required; and
- final applications for the crisis payment scheme totalled around £586,000, similar to previous Household Support Fund allocations, with an additional £50,000 suggested for the oil top-up element, pending confirmation.

The Leader noted that the report would go to the April Council meeting for approval and could include updated funding allocation information at that time.

Opposition group leaders raised the following points and questions:

- enquired whether the eligibility criteria for the scheme required receipt of benefits;
- enquired about any learnings or trends from the seven previous Household Support Schemes and how the Council and partner organisations could improve preventative measures to reduce emergencies and crises, within current system limitations;

- enquired about the financing changes to a consolidated grant instead of the previous refund mechanism for the DHP and whether any unspent funds could be carried forward to the following year; and
- enquired if oversubscribed funds could be drawn into the next year's allocation in advance?

In response to questions raised by opposition Members, the Benefits and Welfare Lead advised that:

- the Crisis Payment scheme targeted low-income households, but eligibility was not restricted to benefit recipients;
- low income was assessed based on individual circumstances, using benefits as a benchmark;
- the Household Support Fund previously focused on short-term cost-of-living payments with little wraparound support. The new scheme highlighted resilience, combining financial help with support services, advice, and signposting to reduce future crises;
- payments were now delivered through grant funding rather than a reimbursement system, providing a use or lose budget for the year;
- flexibility existed to move funds between different strands locally and across Devon, allowing reallocation if some areas were overspending while others were underspending; and
- the new scheme was responsive and adaptive, to uncertain demand and adjustments would be made throughout the year and in future iterations based on experience.

The Leader requested a Councillor briefing on the fund to provide an overview of its operation, eligibility, trends, and learning points and to provide guidance to Members on how Councillors could assist residents, including signposting and support.

The Leader moved the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Wright, voted upon, and CARRIED unanimously

**RECOMMENDED** that Council:

- (1) adopt the draft Crisis and Resilience Fund: Housing Payments policy; and
- (2) grant delegated authority to the Strategic Director for Corporate Resources, in consultation with the Leader and the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Homelessness Prevention & Customer Services, to agree the scheme for disbursing Crisis and Resilience Fund: Crisis Payments.

### **CORPORATE COMPLAINTS POLICY**

The Executive received the report to approve the revised Corporate Complaints Policy, which set out a single, consistent framework for managing all non-housing complaints received by the Council. Particular reference was made to:

- the policy introduced a single, consistent corporate complaints policy for all areas outside housing ombudsman cases;
- it aligned with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's new complaint handling code which would be effective from April 2026 and the Housing Ombudsman code;

- the policy updates included clearer standards, aligned weight scales, stronger oversight, and improved definitions and would provide greater consistency for customers and clearer expectations for staff;
- the policy also enhanced transparency and accountability through annual self-assessment and reporting on all complaints, not just those referred to the Ombudsman;
- the policy established a cross-council complaints learning group to use complaints to drive service improvement and organisational learning; and
- Member responsibility for corporate complaints would be formalised which would strengthen oversight.

During the discussion, Executive Members raised the following points and Questions:

- the alignment between housing and non-housing complaint processes with ombudsman codes was commended;
- it was enquired whether all customer issues were now treated as stage one complaints or if some could be handled as concerns before entering the formal complaint process;
- what was the role of Councillors when residents approached them, including how to explain the process and how issues raised through the Councillor portal were treated;
- a concern was raised about complaints being closed if residents did not respond to emails and whether there was a process to ensure communications reached residents if emails were missing;
- the policy was clear, clean, and easier to understand and the update/status box was commended; and
- clarification was sought on the term partners in section 2.1 of the policy and how it differed from contractors.

In response to questions raised by Executive Members, the Head of Service - Customer & Communities advised that:

- the policy clarified the distinction between service requests and complaints, and it was confirmed that stage one complaints would still be recorded and treated as such, while encouraging resolution at the first point of contact where possible;
- Member enquiries were generally managed through the member inquiry process but Councillors may submit complaints on behalf of constituents with their consent;
- when closing complaints, the preferred contact method was used, and investigations were concluded with a solution even if a complainant did not respond, which was in line with Ombudsman guidance;
- partners were included in the policy only where formal agreements existed; and
- complaints relating to partner delivered programs were handled under the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman complaints code.

An opposition group leader raised the following points and questions:

- concerns were raised regarding the member enquiry portal, noting that it remained a work in progress and was not currently considered fit for purpose by the Member.
- concerns were raised about the member enquiry portal, noting it was still a work in progress and was not currently considered by the Member fit for purpose;

- there was a need for a clear mechanism for Councillors to raise complaints on behalf of residents;
- the policy lacked explicit consideration of vulnerability, despite Ombudsman guidance recommending that complexity and vulnerability be factored into complaint handling; and
- it was enquired whether the process included direct engagement with complainants, noting that residents may only receive an email without dialogue or reassurance, and how could this be handled better.

In response to questions raised by opposition Members, the Head of Service - Customer & Communities

- complaints from vulnerable individuals would receive tailored support, with adaptations made to the handling process to reflect their needs;
- all adjustments and support provided would be recorded and anonymised, with annual reporting on those measures; and
- regardless of vulnerability, further clarification would be sought from complainants when needed, and any extensions to complaint timelines would be clearly communicated with reasons provided.

The Leader moved the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Wright, voted upon, and CARRIED unanimously

**RECOMMENDED** that Council approve the revised Corporate Complaints Policy.

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### **GENDER PAY GAP REPORT**

The Executive considered the report which outlined the statutory requirement under the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties and Public Authorities) Regulations 2017 for local authorities employing more than 250 staff to publish annual gender pay gap information. Particular reference was made to:

- Exeter City Council demonstrated a strong gender balance, with no structural disadvantage for women, with women earning more than men on both mean and median hourly rates (gender pay gap of - 6.68%);
- women were well represented in senior roles, particularly in the upper-middle quartile (62.3% women), showing a strong progression pipeline;
- the lower quartile showed an under representation of women, largely in operational roles such as waste and recycling, reflecting job family composition rather than inequality;
- Exeter City Council had no bonus payments and a transparent, consistent pay and grading framework, which supported equitable outcomes; and
- efforts were being made to reduce the gender pay gap, with a focus on removing barriers rather than overcorrection, with the negative gap reflecting workforce composition rather than unfair pay practices.

The Deputy Leader & Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services, Community Safety and City Centre noted positively that women in the workforce were encouraged and supported to progress to higher responsibility and pay levels, and this achievement was commended.

The Leader moved the recommendations, which were seconded by Councillor Wright, voted upon, and CARRIED unanimously

**RESOLVED** that Executive note:

- (1) the findings of the Gender Pay Gap analysis, including:
  - a) the average rate of pay for females remains higher than for males;
  - b) the mean gender pay difference has increased from 5.07% to 6.68%;
  - c) the median gender pay difference has decreased from 14.03% to 11.85%;  
and
  - d) there are nearly three times more males than females in the lowest earnings quartile.
- (2) that the Council would publish its Gender Pay Gap Report on the Exeter City Council website and on the national gov.uk database; and
- (3) that the report would be reviewed annually to track the relationship between female and male earnings.

(The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.48 pm)

Chair

**The decisions indicated will normally come into force 5 working days after publication of the Statement of Decisions unless called in by a Scrutiny Committee. Where the matter in question is urgent, the decision will come into force immediately. Decisions regarding the policy framework or corporate objectives or otherwise outside the remit of the Executive will be considered by Council on 7 April 2026.**