

EXECUTIVE

Tuesday 28 April 2026

Present:

Councillor Bialyk (Chair)

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

Also present:

Councillor Hughes (as an opposition group Co-Leader);

Councillor Haigh (as an opposition group Co-Leader);

Councillor Holland (as an opposition group Leader);

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

Councillor Payne (as an opposition group Leader).

Also present:

Chief Executive, Strategic Director for Place, Head of Service - City Centre and Net Zero, Head of Legal and Democratic Services & Monitoring Officer and Democratic Services Officer

123

MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 March 2026, were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

124

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests were made.

125

QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC UNDER STANDING ORDER NO. 19

No questions from members of the public were received.

126

MATTERS REFERRED BY SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

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

127

EXETER CITY CENTRE VISION AND STRATEGY 2026 – 2031 PUBLIC CONSULTATION

The Executive received the report on the draft City Centre Strategy 2026 - 2031, entitled 'Exeter: Our City Centre', which was in the final stages of its development and that feedback was being sought from residents and the business community. As such the report was seeking authorisation from the Executive to go out to public consultation from 18 May 2026 for six weeks.

The Strategic Director for Place in presenting the report made the following points:

- the report was presented in conjunction with the Exeter Cultural Strategy 2026 – 2031, seeking approval to proceed to public consultation and neither strategy documents had been published at this time;
- both strategies had been developed through extensive prior engagement with key stakeholders, supported by research and evidence gathering;
- both documents followed a consistent structure: a clear vision, key themes, and supporting strategic actions;

- subject to Executive approval, the documents would then be published for public consultation, with a view to reporting back to Executive to recommend Council approval in September 2026;
- each strategy will develop more detailed action plans, which would be co-produced with stakeholders and partners, ensuring shared ownership while the Council provided leadership to bring them forward;
- delivery would be supported by theme-based groups drawing on specialist expertise to help prepare the Council for future local government reorganisation, aligning with approaches already adopted in unitary authorities elsewhere;
- a preview of the draft City Centre Strategy was provided and it was re-iterated that the final document had not yet been shared publicly;
- the strategy was framed as a Council-led approach, setting new policy direction for the city centre;
- work had commenced before the Covid pandemic, but had been paused, and since been re-shaped to reflect the changed economic conditions and high street challenges, with a focus on long-term resilience and placemaking;
- engagement during 2024 included facilitated workshops with local businesses, community groups, and elected Members from both Devon County Council and Exeter City Council;
- workshop discussions had explored challenges, opportunities, and priorities for the city centre, with feedback and anonymised quotes forming the strategy;
- a resident survey findings highlighted the strong links between the city centre and culture, reinforcing the alignment between the strategies;
- a soft city centre boundary was defined for the strategic purpose, which was rooted in historic geography, four key gateways, movement routes, and key assets (parks, heritage buildings, connections);
- the strategy also set out a clear, accessible, and ambitious vision, reflecting stakeholder feedback;
- six key themes had been identified during the process, which was based on engagement and evidence, and would be delivered through the detailed action plan;
- the next steps, following Executive approval was to proceed to a six week public consultation, after the forthcoming local elections;
- the consultation outcomes would be reported back to Executive, with any proposed amendments and recommendations for Full Council for adoption;
- a detailed action plan, including outcomes, outputs, responsibilities, costs, and partner contributions would also be developed at the same time; and
- all actions would be embedded within Council service plans, ensuring a corporate and cross-council approach to delivery.

The Strategic Director for Place further confirmed that while the report could not be published or formally consulted upon during the pre-election period, preparatory work could continue. The strategy had been in development for several years and was now at a stage where Member consideration was needed.

The report was being brought to Executive to enable consultation to begin promptly once the pre-election period ends, ensuring sufficient time for adoption and the commencement of action planning ahead of anticipated organisational change.

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

- it was enquired whether sufficient time would be allowed to revise the strategy prior to adoption, should the consultation raise significant comments or concerns;
- noting the short timetable, it was queried whether the consultation materials were already prepared, what form the consultation would take, and whether the relevant Portfolio Holder would have sight of the consultation questions and format;
- it was enquired whether Portfolio Holders were restricted from providing further input into the strategies prior to consultation during the pre-election period, noting that Portfolio Holders had already seen the final draft;
- clarification was sought on whether Members were being asked to endorse the overall direction, timescales and scope of consultation, subject to pre-election restrictions, and whether Portfolio Holders would continue to be involved in fine-tuning the document before publication; and
- further detail on the consultation approach was sought, specifically on how the Council intended to reach harder-to-reach groups given that the consultation would be conducted online.

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

- there was sufficient time built into the timetable to collate, analyse and assess consultation responses and to make revisions to the strategy document if required prior to adoption;
- the strategies had been drafted in a future-proofed way, drawing heavily on extensive prior engagement, and therefore significant unexpected issues were not anticipated;
- a full consultation report would be prepared and presented alongside the final strategy;
- the consultation would be undertaken primarily through an online survey and questions were in the process of being developed. They would be broadly consistent with those used during the 2024 workshops, with some refinements based on learning from that engagement;
- the consultation would be hosted on the Council's engagement platform and prepared in advance to ensure it was ready to launch promptly;
- the document was still in draft form and remained under full editorial control, with scope for further minor adjustments and changes could continue to be made until the document was finalised and uploaded to the consultation platform, at which point it would not be amended again until after consultation;
- the consultation would be widely publicised to ensure that businesses, residents and other stakeholders were made aware of it, and able to access the online survey;
- no further workshops, events or exhibitions were planned, as extensive face-to-face engagement had already been undertaken earlier in the process;
- support would be available in line with the Council's consultation charter to assist individuals who may need help accessing the online platform or documents;
- alternative methods of response, including written submissions, would be accepted and encouraged;
- partner organisations would also be encouraged to use their networks to promote the consultation and to submit their own collective views; and
- all feedback received through those channels would be collated and considered as part of the overall analysis.

Opposition group leaders raised the following points and questions:

- would the strategy document include proposals for physical redevelopment in the city centre, and how it related to previous strategic documents, particularly in distinguishing between minor public realm improvements and larger future redevelopment opportunities;
- clarification was sought on how the strategy aligned with the Exeter Local Plan and whether there were any implications for that process;
- had formal input been received from Devon County Council and whether their views would be reflected in the strategy;
- had the authority responsible for public transport, been given the opportunity to input into the strategy following the transfer of powers in April;
- what was the legal status of the strategy once adopted by Exeter City Council, particularly in the context of the interim period leading to the creation of a new unitary authority;
- it was requested that the Equality Impact section (page 24) be amended so that the commentary on potential barriers to engaging with an online consultation, currently referenced under race, also be included under the protected characteristics of gender reassignment and sexual orientation; and
- it was noted that these groups may similarly experience difficulties engaging with the consultation, particularly given wider global circumstances affecting feelings of safety and confidence in participation.

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

- the Equality Impact Assessment would be updated to include commentary on barriers to engagement under the protected characteristics of gender reassignment and sexual orientation;
- the strategy was not a statutory planning, highways or Combined Authority document and carried no formal legal status beyond being a consultation document;
- the strategy did not allocate land or propose specific development and was not a land use plan, but it aligned with the emerging Local Plan, the Corporate Plan and other related strategies;
- the strategy was described as a strategic, non-statutory framework intended to bring partners and stakeholders together to develop collaborative actions and investment opportunities; and
- it did not place legal obligations on any organisation, unlike formal plans such as the Local Plan or transport strategies.

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

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the publication of the draft City Centre Strategy 2026 – 2031 be approved for public consultation from 18 May 2026 for six weeks; and
- 2) delegated authority be granted to the Strategic Director for Place, in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder, to change the consultation date if required.

The Executive received the report on the Cultural Strategy, which was in the final stages of its development and that feedback was being sought from residents and

the cultural sector. As such the report was seeking authorisation from the Executive to go out to public consultation from 18 May 2026 for six weeks.

The Strategic Director for Place in presenting the report made the following points:

- a team of consultants had been appointed primarily to lead on engagement and undertake detailed research, bringing together the extensive existing evidence on culture in Exeter into a comprehensive baseline resource document to support consultation;
- engagement had taken place over a six month period and involved over 600 residents, individual artists and cultural organisations, with a strong and positive level of participation;
- the engagement process included multiple stages, culminating in a stakeholder summit at Exeter College;
- further targeted workshops and in-person engagements were also held to explore outstanding issues and ensure views were fully captured;
- consultant work was now complete and that the draft strategy had been refined internally, working with the Portfolio Holder, ahead of consultation;
- subject to approval, the strategy would be published for online consultation from 18 May, in line with the City Centre Strategy timetable;
- the draft vision focusing on creative confidence, inclusion and connection to culture, environment and heritage, supported by the headline: 'Exeter: a City of Creative Confidence';
- the strategy was structured around the four key themes as outlined in the report;
- the next steps included the consultation running from 18 May, with consultation outcomes being reported to Executive in August, to recommend adoption by Full Council in September; and
- the action planning would be developed alongside the Exeter Partnership and the Connected Culture group, with an emphasis on sector ownership, collaboration and strengthening the collective voice of Exeter's cultural sector to attract investment and funding.

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

- the Cultural Strategy and its ambition were welcomed, particularly the links between environment and culture;
- it was enquired as to how the consultation would reach residents who felt culture was not for them, noting concerns that an open, predominantly online consultation might not engage those groups, and how breadth and inclusivity of feedback would be ensured;
- the importance of both the City Centre and Cultural Strategy consultations was highlighted, but their parallel timing and overlapping audiences was noted;
- it was asked how officers intended to present and manage the two consultations to avoid any consultation fatigue and maximise participation across both;
- clarification was sought on the composition of the group that would help deliver the Cultural Strategy action plan, including their composition, how members had been selected, and how the group had been convened; and
- the wording of Theme 2 (connecting the ecosystem), was unclear and it was suggested that explicitly referencing "grassroots" culture within the theme would make its intent clearer and more accessible to readers;

The Portfolio Holder for Arts, Culture & Tourism reflected on the resident survey findings, which showed an overall high satisfaction with cultural provision, but emphasised the importance of the action plan in addressing those who still experienced barriers. He highlighted specific groups such as young people, individual artists, creative practitioners and ethnic minority communities, and questioned whether governance structures of key cultural institutions were sufficiently representative.

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

- work would continue in proactively reaching all relevant sectors during consultation, and working closely with engagement colleagues to ensure an inclusive outreach;
- the consultation survey included questions aimed at identifying and addressing barriers to participation;
- a shared digital landing page would be used to allow participants to clearly see both strategies and choose which consultation to complete, with the option to return and complete the second, ensuring neither consultation was missed;
- all theme groups operated through the Exeter Partnership and membership was self-selected from partner organisations, rather than appointed by the City Council;
- the groups were supported by the Council through meeting coordination and secretariat support and Members volunteered their time;
- the groups met quarterly, and arrangements remained flexible to allow movement and additional participation; and
- the suggestion regarding clearer wording for Theme 2 was welcomed. It was confirmed that the theme title would be revised to explicitly reference “grassroots” culture, to improve clarity and accessibility of the strategy language.

An opposition group leader requested that the same amendment previously discussed, also be applied to page 39 of the Equality Impact Assessment. They also sought clarification regarding the engagement approach for protected characteristics, noting that page 39 confirmed consultation links would be shared with groups supporting gender reassignment and race, but that a similar reference was absent under sexual orientation on page 40. The Member asked for reassurance that appropriate outreach would also be undertaken for that protected characteristic.

In response to questions raised by opposition Members, the Strategic Director for Place confirmed that the Equality Impact Assessment would be updated.

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

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the publication of the draft Cultural Strategy 2026 - 2031 be approved for public consultation from 18 May 2026 for six weeks; and
- 2) delegated authority be granted to the Strategic Director for Place, in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder, to agree a change to the consultation date if required.

The Chair thanked Members and officers at the final Executive meeting of the municipal year, recognising all the individual contributions and hard work across all the portfolios including finance, planning, culture, climate change, housing, homelessness, communities and city development. Appreciation was expressed to the Executive Members for their commitment, expertise and support over the year.

Special thanks were also given to Councillor Bob Foale for his service as Portfolio Holder, noting his decision to stand down.

The Chair also acknowledged the support and guidance provided by the Chief Executive, Strategic Directors and Legal Services, recognising the challenges faced and the positive direction of the Council's work.

Thanks, and best wishes were extended to the Democratic Services Officer, noting his departure and starting in his new role. Recognition was given to his dedicated support to all councillors and his contribution to effective democratic processes at the Council.

The Chair concluded by wishing all Members and candidates well for the upcoming elections and expressed his hope for a continued future cross-party working in the best interests of Exeter.

(The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 6.24 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 16 June 2026.

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