CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

22 January 2026

Present:
Councillor Catherine Rees (Chair)
Councillors Cookson, Fullam, Holland, Hussain, Payne, Pole, Read and Snow

Apologies:
Councillors Begley and Wardle

Also present:
Strategic Director for Corporate Resources, Head of Service - Finance and Democratic Services Manager

In attendance as Portfolio Holder:
Councillors Bialyk, Vizard, Williams and Wright.

92 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 13 November 2025 were taken as read, approved and signed by the Chair as correct.

93 Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

94 Questions from the Public under Standing Order No. 19

There were no questions submitted by the public.

95 Questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order No. 20

There were no questions submitted in advance by Members and no questions put to Portfolio Holders present.

96 Portfolio Holder Report from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Bialyk.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Bialyk presented his Portfolio Holder update report drawing attention to the following points:

a) the provisional financial settlement which he welcomed along with the briefing from the Strategic Director of Corporate Resources and Head of Service – Finance and he thanked officers for their advice;
b) strategic partnerships, there would be bid to become a City of Culture coming forward. An expression of interest would be submitted, resources would be required but there would be some funding available, especially for initial feasibility and therefore no drain on council finances;
c) Exeter Civic University Agreement, there were minutes produced rather than actions and he would like minutes to be available to Members;
d) Exeter Partnership information was contained within the report;
e) the new Corporate Plan;
f) Materials Reclamation Facility (MRF), discussions were taking place and a report would be brought to Council in February addressing Senate Court as well;

g) Rennes House still had ariels on top and having those removed had created a delay;
h) Whipton Gardens was an excellent facility and the next phase would come forward when finances were in place;
i) he had visits planned, with Directors, to Mallinson Bridge and the City Wall;
j) a meeting had been set up with group leaders to discuss the way forward for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), to brief members and to look at what would be involved;
k) the Secretary of State had made a decision today therefore there would be focus on shadow elections for 2027;
l) Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority were discussing transport and putting a budget in place. A concern in the residents' survey was buses and transport despite not being the responsible authority.

The Leader responded to Members' questions in the following terms:

a) he and Directors understood that those in the vicinity of the Laings properties had not had a good experience. There had been contractor issues but the work would be done and contractors were in place and would be on site. Phase B at Vaughn Road had been delayed in order to commit to the Laings properties;
b) a Cultural Strategy was being developed and a principle of involving community stakeholders would be important in the City of Culture bid;
c) there was no feedback at present on the use of AI in the planning initiative;
d) Exeter City Council had no formal role in the Mallinson Bridge replacement but he would be making contact with the relevant Cabinet Member of Devon County Council and he was not aware of the terms of the bid to Active Travel England but would ask;
e) he would discuss Toronto House in Prince Charles Road with Directors to determine whether it was embedded in the retrofit programme but he pointed out that some properties were now privately owned;
f) he was pleased that Widgery Road residents were happy with the reactive repairs service and he would discuss nature accreditation with Councillor Vizard to see if there was anything Members could do to help;
g) the legal team were working hard on the issue of having telecoms equipment removed from Rennes House and he would ask the relevant Strategic Director if there was a timeline for this;
h) there were some funds allocated to undertaking work associated with LGR but it was likely that this issue would come before council in due course; and
i) assets were being looked at with an ambition to ensure that a good council was handed over to a new authority.

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources stated that food waste roll out was not impacted by the MRF. He confirmed that 4000 homes had been added this week and the project was on track to be delivered in its entirety by the end of March.

Councillor Ruth Williams, Portfolio Holder for City Management, was invited to the table by the Chair and stated that she had written to the relevant Member of Devon County Council and had followed up requesting a response but had not yet received one and would write again in another week's time.

The Chair invited Councillor Vizard to speak, who stated that nature towns and cities work was underway and there were monthly meetings of the partnership and an action plan would follow which would be consulted upon before an application being made later in the year. He would ensure that members were updated. Councillor Pole asked that he feedback to the group that councillors and residents could support.

97 **Quarter 2 Budget Scrutiny**

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources presented the report making the following points:

a) the Strategy came before the funding settlement was known;
b) scrutiny had an important role and this was an opportunity to understand under and over-spends in year and look at proposals going forward;
c) the issues were set out and some there may be concerns about and officers would take these away to work with the relevant Strategic Directors and Heads of Service;
d) in terms of the list of work in preparation for LGR, it was not exhaustive but property was front and centre to ensure a good position to go to a new unitary authority; and
e) dependent upon the outcome of LGR there would be discussions with other authorities.

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources and Head of Service – Finance responded to Members' questions in the following terms:

a) a very high success rate remained within the Waste Service despite sickness and recruitment challenges;
b) Environmental Health and Licensing services continued to be provided despite recruitment challenges and a statutory report would be brought to the Executive in the autumn;
c) the report showed projections at the end of the year and anticipated change was shown within the budget which was determined in consultation with budget managers and Heads of Service;
d) there was an apprenticeship programme which it was being looked to extend as there were many specialist areas in local authority which didn't exist in other businesses. The Council Tax Team were taking on apprentices where there was government funding. The Legal Team had also had success with apprentices. He would get an update on the number of apprentices the council currently had;
e) capital projects were financed in a number of ways - from revenue, grants from central government or other organisations, section 106 agreements, CIL, borrowing (usually from the public works loans board but not always and usually for longer term assets), or the sale of other capital assets which would generate capital receipts which could only be used for two purposes, building more capital assets or repayment of debt);
f) spend on the capital programme was weak due to challenges with resources and the ambition being larger than it being possible to deliver in one year therefore improvement was needed in planning across multiple years. A Capital Programme Board was now in place, led by the Chief Executive which should support improvement. Another issue had been that a number of projects had gone out to tender and bids had been received which were significantly higher than the budget set. This had been an issue in the construction sector across the South West;
g) CIL was statutory and a Planning matter therefore a specific debt collection process had to be followed and this would not lie with the new collections team. CIL was managed by the Strategic Management Board who received a monthly report. CIL was often large sums of money therefore one debt could be a significant amount which would skew data. This was not a concern to him but there was a need to keep a focus on CIL given the size and statutory nature;
h) there was a rental income of £8.5million for commercial assets and whilst there had been challenges in retail over a number of years, ensuring clean data was the responsibility of the new team as was ensuring that other teams

chased debts due to them. The team were currently focusing on debt over 5 years old. As the financial regulations had changed it would take time for observable reductions to filter through. Debt write-off was carried out on a six-monthly basis;

i) a rise of £1.3million of outstanding debt could be one invoice and there were some challenges being negotiated with developers which had been a successful approach and the majority had now been paid. Invoices could be one day old and not in fact due yet but would show as a debt;
j) CIL had previously been incorrectly shown against Commercial Assets but had now moved to the correct service area;
k) he would ask the relevant Strategic Director about the capital programme for Fire Risk Assessment Works and the City Wall but it maybe that timing of the report was at play as he believed that the City Wall works had been undertaken;
l) Guildhall Shopping Centre enhancements was an ongoing budget with uncertain timing. Part of roof required replacement and works were dependent on new leaseholders coming into the centre and the requirement to fit out;
m) the Guildhall Shopping Centre was purchased in the knowledge that there was a gap between rent delivered and debt required to service the centre. Debt each year of £1.33million and net rental was over £2million which had dropped slightly reducing what went the into ear-marked reserve but a comfortable amount could still be placed there which funded staff in the organisation to deal with Guildhall work;
n) invoices were auto-generated when a new lease was entered into. An audit report into sundry debt had highlighted a slowness which ha been taken up with the relevant service areas.
o) the biggest challenge with voids in the HRA was the significant increase in the cost of repairs. Housing maintenance were very much aware of this and keen to address it. Income was coming down as voids were longer and repairs and maintenance had more to do. He was not aware additional staff being taken on to address this at the moment but this would remain under review; and
p) Strata moving out of the Civic Centre would not have any impact on the budget as when they were set up across the three district councils part of the agreement was that accommodation would be provided.

The Chair invited the Portfolio Holder for City Management, Councillor Ruth Williams to assist with a question regarding Heavitree Park. Councillor Williams stated that there was no delay and procurement had been undertaken. Changes in the procurement of play parks had caused a delay and therefore a few parks were put together as a cluster. Work would begin in new financial year and Heavitree was top priority. The paddling pool had already been consulted upon and there would be additional public consultation on the type of play equipment for the play park, and the utmost would be done to have the paddling pool open in time for the school summer holidays.

98 **Medium Term Financial Plan**

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources presented the report making the following points:

a) the report was written in December 2025 before the settlement had been announced but a Briefing had been held the previous week therefore the position was slightly different to set that out in the report;
b) for context the MTFP in February 2025 required a saving of £3.5m due to the business rate reset and change to the funding formula;

c) in setting a proposed budget, assumptions were set out in the report and there was nothing different in services to the public just spending less or generating an income which wasn't recognised in the budget which was comfortable from an officer position;
d) Parks income showed additional £10,000. This was already being generated but not reflected in budget;
e) the key message was that there was a balanced budget across the life of the Plan. There were pressures in the budget but the it remained balanced;
f) based on known information there would be no requirement to find additional savings in the next financial year;
g) a three-year settlement had been received and the third year provided funding for the whole of the county to be shared across whatever authorities were in place; and
h) the Budget consultation had taken place, the raw data had been received and the team were analysing this in order to attach to the budget papers. There had been 58 responses to the consultation.

The Chair gave some context about the Parks and Green Spaces Team which she had visited along with other councillors and asked if it was possible to divert funds to this team.

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources responded to Members' questions in the following terms:

a) the budget would be proposed and other individuals or groups could put forward an alternative budget or recommendations from this committee could be made to the Executive which would meet on 3 February;
b) the Communities team were in discussion with Citizens Advice Exeter with regards to their needs for the next year;
c) advised that with regard to a climate adaptation and resilience plan it was not known what this would cost but the committee could ask the Executive to consider what the impact of introducing this would be;
d) officers now had a system to separate the property and community elements of assets. The community element would be led by the Communities Team and more defined process was now in place in terms of what a community would need to demonstrate and consider, and the property side would ben managed by the Commercial Assets Team. A community asset transfer would not always be required. There could be a small lease or a peppercorn rent agreed; and
e) the Extended Responsibility Grant was used to fund the waste and recycling services as that was the expectation of DEFRA who managed the process.

The Chair set out the 4 recommendations of areas which could potentially be supported should funds be available:

1. A peppercorn rent continues for Citizens Advice Exeter
2. More resource is directed to the Parks and Green Spaces Team
3. The Climate Action Plan is strengthened by adding an Adaptation and Resilience plan
4. Support is strengthened for community asset transfer.

During discussion some Members' felt that they would like to see the residents survey results before making recommendations.

The Strategic Director for Corporate Resources clarified the timing of budget scrutiny stating that at a June meeting officers could set the budget scene and the committee could look at the budget in light of the residents survey results, in November scrutiny could look at potential areas to make recommendations to the Executive and in February the budget, as set, could be scrutinised.

The Chair proposed, seconded by Councillor Payne, the recommendations set out above, which following a vote was **CARRIED**.

Recommended to the Executive Committee that:

1. A peppercorn rent continues for Citizens Advice Exeter
2. More resource is directed to the Parks and Green Spaces Team
3. The Climate Action Plan is strengthened by adding an adaptation and resilience plan
4. Support is strengthened for community asset transfer.

99 **Scrutiny Work Plan and Proposals Received**

The Chair informed the committee that the recommendation to Licensing would be heard at the Licensing Committee on 27 January 2026 but that a response had been received from the Principal Licensing Officer explaining that it was not possible to have a policy which stated times in which alcohol could not be sold but that if there was evidence of concerns related to a particular premise then the review procedure should be utilised.

As a member of the Licensing Committee, Councillor Holland encouraged Members to look at applications which were live, which could be found on the council website or to look at previous reviews via Licensing Sub-Committee agenda papers.

The Chair proposed that Commercialisation Strategy item be allocated to the June meeting and the Empty Homes item be allocated to the September meeting. The Chair also stated that following advice taken from officers an item should be placed in the work plan regarding the Community Safety Partnership for the September meeting and the Medium-Term Financial Plan for the November meeting.

Following a vote the draft Scrutiny Work Plan as amended was **AGREED**.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.15 pm

Chair