



Victoria Hatfield
Cllr. Lucy Findlay
Ian Collinson
Exeter City Council

By email

28 June 2026

Draft Exeter City Centre Strategy 2026 – 2031 Consultation

Dear Victoria,

We are pleased to comment upon this draft Strategy, and we hope that there will be significant changes and improvements based on the responses you receive. We have completed the on-line survey but that is mainly a tick box exercise with only opportunities to add a few comments, so I am writing to you in the hope that our additional comments can enhance the final strategy. I am copying the letter to the City Centre portfolio holder, Cllr Lucy Findlay, and Ian Collinson, Director of Place.

I have used the format of the survey pages to structure this letter and hope you will accept it as a formal response.

1. About You.

This response has been prepared by members of Exeter Civic Society's committee. We have encouraged our members to reply via the consultation site.

3. Why did you decide to take part in this consultation survey?

The Civic Society is the preeminent voluntary organisation in the city that looks at the city's needs across all sectors of activity relating to the built, geographical and historical environments.

We were disappointed that we needed to complain to you about the initial poor status of the consultation webpage because at that time it did not meet the standards set out in your own Consultation Charter. We hope that future consultations will be set out better and in compliance with the charter.

4. Thinking about the Vision outlined above.

The vision statements set a reasonable ambition for city centre activity, but if the order is an indication of priority we are not sure this reflects what residents will prioritise. It would be better if the vision was better aligned to the 6 themes.

We are not sure how commerce will be *brought to life for everyone*; this needs more explanation. Good to see mention of performers '*a stone's throw from the walls*' but who pays for this and how is it organised; some initial clarity is needed. We think more could be added to the penultimate statement because reducing car use for individual journeys, improving public transport, and reducing congestion should be a high priority for ECC and the new Unitary Authority once it has control over all aspects of the new district. We do not think the final item works as a city centre strategy if linked to climate.

We would like to comment upon three sections in the Strategy 'Our city centre today', 'The bounds of our city centre', and 'The Strategy' that are not part of the survey.

The 'City Centre Today' and 'The Bounds of Our City' need to be merged into one, or re-written. The first, whilst having a good opening statement and a good first description of the city, then has four statements about the future; perhaps they should be within the Vision section? The descriptions in the next section on page seven do give a description of the city centre today so would sit better on page five. But we would like to see some honest recognition of 'our city today' recognising that there is too much traffic, anti-social behaviour, and a lack of evening events.

The strategy should mention the leisure and cultural attractions that do exist such as RAMM, Transport connectivity, swimming pools, cinemas, bingo, bowling alley, Phoenix, Barnfield Theatre, Corn Exchange, city walls and our history, the ship canal and historic quays, water-based leisure activities, as well as a large range of places to eat and drink. The strategy should build on these and fill gaps.

In describing the city centre Magdalen Road is mentioned but it is not included in the city centre map so it should either be included in the map or excluded from the text/strategy. Perhaps some of the vibrant city centre streets such as Gandy Street and Fore Street should get a mention as well?

The final sentence on page 5 is meaningless in its vagueness. The photo chosen shows people looking bored and rushing along the densely packed Christmas Market. Unintentionally this depicts the truth about the present state of the city centre, more so than the accompanying text.

The strategy fails to define the difference between the city centre and the city centre area, which might not be the same given the colouring in the map on page 7. There seems to be different shades of beige used within the city walls, and an even lighter shade of beige used in a wider area, which probably marks the 'City Centre Area'. The map would benefit from more distinctive colour choices and a legend explaining their use.

We accept the statements about the benefits of educational establishments on page 7, but it does not recognise that outside of term time this creates a problem of a widely empty city centre, especially in the evening. A solution to overcome this would be to focus on the role of tourism and visitors to counteract the lack of footfall outside of term time. Some businesses close down during these times; others vanish completely as they are not viable all year round.

The sentence about '*Arriving by public transport*' would be better by stating: 'provide the key infrastructure for improvements towards what needs to become excellent connectivity.'

5. Thinking about the six themes in the City Centre Strategy, please rank them in order of importance to you personally - where 1 is your highest priority.

Theme One – Appearance and Cleanliness. Theme Two – Safety, Accessibility and Wellbeing. Theme Three – Daytime and Night-Time Economy. Theme Four – Destination Offer. Theme Five – City Centre Living. Theme Six – Connectivity of the City Centre

We recognise that people will have different views about their priorities, but as the Civic Society for Exeter we believe the priority order should first reflect the needs of local people and then those who live in the city's hinterland that travel into the city for shopping leisure and cultural activities. Our ranking is based on the priority actions listed in the subsequent sections of this strategy.

1st. Theme 3. 2nd Theme 2. 3rd Theme 1. 4th Theme 6. 5th Theme 4 6th Theme 5.

But we recognise that in considering the big picture for a more vibrant city centre that themes 3 and 4 are crucial to changing the climate in the city, as we suggest in our responses below.

6. Thinking about Appearance and Cleanliness, please rank which priority actions are of greatest importance to you, where number 1 is of greatest importance.

Ensure the city centre's public spaces create an attractive green city centre environment:
Find better ways to keep the city centre clean and tidy seven days a week:
Make space for nature within existing spaces and new developments
Introduce vibrant city dressing to enliven streets, historic and cultural buildings:
Raise pride in the city centre, leveraging effort from residents and businesses:

We will not rank these five priorities here other than suggesting that '*raising pride in the city*' centre should be the first priority. This embraces many of the others including a cleaner city. We believe there should be more priorities, such as repairing street paving and furniture timely to maintain pride and safety; a commitment by the council to remove graffiti; and to encourage landlords to improve and maintain the upper floors of their buildings – many facades are neglected.

The first priority is not clear- is it suggested that most streets should have more planting? For the second priority we recall that the city council acquired a machine to remove chewing gum from the streets but the central area is still blighted by such mess, in contrast to the two shopping centres. The Clean Streets Charter should be cited here to keep pavements clear of clutter, including commercial waste bins.

For priority three we do not understand how this differs from priority one- can this be clarified? We also wonder whether the greening of some modern facades could be an aim.

For the final priority, we do not think residents should need to put in any physical effort to raise pride in the city centre- this should be down to the council, businesses and organisations.

7. Theme Two – Safety, Accessibility and Wellbeing.

We find this theme to be reasonable as written but we would like to see more of a commitment to improve parks and open spaces with plans to modernise them so they are more vibrant and usable for all, with more seating, art, and perhaps children's play equipment. Perhaps a development plan for each park/green space with input from the public could help achieve this. This could offer great volunteering opportunities for the public to maintain the grounds and plants.

We support improvements to street lighting because it does not seem bright enough to support people's safety through the night. Perhaps this theme should read '*improve and diversify lighting*' to help streets and buildings look more attractive as well.

In respect of more CCTV, we think any existing or new strategy should justify increases and be consulted upon.

In considering people's wellbeing, we suggest the council should add a priority for the installation of public drinking fountains so people can be hydrated when temperatures are increasing.

8. Theme Three – Daytime and Night-Time Economy

Thinking about Safety, Daytime and Night-Time Economy, please rank which priority actions are of greatest importance to you, where number 1 is of greatest importance.

We find the opening statements and priorities appropriate but we wonder how deliverable these are without initiatives driven by the city council to achieve them. With most shops in the city centre controlled by private landlords how will start-ups be attracted without subsidised rents? It should not take long for the council to ascertain from landlords whether this is likely. In addition, ECC could commit to making a range of their premises available at reduced rents, although it is important that a diverse range of shops develop in each street. We hope this will be clarified in updated text or the Action Tracker and Technical Report.

In the opening statement, in making the city a magnet for businesses, do the words that follow relate to retaining entrepreneurs and businesses, or visitors to the city centre? If the latter, then '*bringing in all sectors of the population in the evenings*' should be added.

In the penultimate priority, Tourists should be added because they will boost footfall, are additional to the existing and indigenous population, and will bring further expenditure.

An aspiration for a permanent city centre market should be included, perhaps on the remaining parts of the old bus station site.

The Society will also be responding to the draft Cultural Strategy, but it seems to us that without an improved range of city centre theatre, music venues, and galleries, the desire to improve the night-time economy will be unsuccessful.

9. Theme Four – Destination Offer

The ambition expressed in the opening statement is good, but this strategy will be taken forward by the new unitary authority which will also need to focus on the competing needs of communities across the new unitary area, but there may also be greater opportunities if the wider community sees Exeter as the centre of the cultural offer. To achieve a destination offer we believe the new unitary council will need to drive many of the priorities forward rather than rely on businesses, but it is worth noting that the UNESCO City of Literature, and the canal's Heritage Harbour status have been established by independent organisations, not the city council.

As a destination offer, we believe attracting people and tourists to visit our built heritage should be the priority because our history is all around the city and just needs minor changes to attract more people, ensuring sufficient hotel space and promotion. Less tangible culture such as arts and literature need more development.

In the third priority '*our nature offer*' is mentioned – what is meant by this? We are not aware of an initiative by the council to promote this. If it does exist, or the city council has specific plans for nature trails in the city centre then this needs to be explained, if not, the statement should be removed.

For the penultimate priority, we do not believe the city centre has the facilities to attract businesses for events – what high quality conference spaces exist? If the council or businesses have plans to develop this in the city centre then specific sites should be mentioned, but if not in the city centre, then the priority should be removed.

The development of more performing arts and cultural events is welcome, but the council must co-ordinate this if a broad high quality offer is to be delivered and advertised. In a modern age we support the plan to develop digital tools to compliment written information about events, and hope that the Civic Society's emerging trees mapping app can contribute towards this.

The council must develop a central hub for tourist information etc., either at the ticket office in Fore Street, and/or the underground passages office on Paris Street. The latter has an excellent exhibition in the basement about ancient Exeter and we know from a FOI request that it is well visited and staffed, so with a few adjustments it will make an excellent visitor centre. The Fore Street ticket office is a short distance from the tourist bus stops in South Street, so ideally placed to support tourists. It will not take much to turn these venues into much needed tourist information centres.

10. Theme Five – City Centre Living

Through Liveable Exeter, work with developers in bringing forward city centre regeneration sites

Unlock and deliver other major city centre development opportunities

Collaborate with statutory, voluntary and community partners to deliver a joined-up approach to reducing homelessness in the city centre

Incorporate energy efficiency measures into existing new buildings

Encourage property owners and developers to create living spaces above city centre retail and mixed-use ground floors

Incorporate innovative solutions within buildings, transport provision, energy and other infrastructure to achieve the ambitions for a net zero city.

Whilst the first two statements are reasonable, there has not been any affordable or family housing built in the centre for some time now- all PBSA, Co-living, and expensive apartments. We hope that in developing briefs and/or master plans for the city centre, the council will cite the need for homes that addresses the city's housing needs register, and with mixed communities as the Local Plan.

The third opening statement should relate to '*all residents and visitors*' or be removed because it is simply stating the obvious for those who reside in the city centre.

There are good priorities here but the proposed development sites should be identified so the general public are clear about where they are. Encouragement of developing upper floors into homes is positive.

We suggest an additional 'Priority action': *Support innovative use of student flats outside term times*, especially in the summer (e.g. for tourists, language course participants) to guarantee a year-round lived-in environment in the city centre, and increase the viability of shops during the period when students have left the city and footfall is reduced.

Enhancements and expansion of green spaces within the centre should be included to provide people with more leisure space, rather than just paved areas.

We do not think the final priority sits well here so should be removed. Any development will have to meet planning and building regulations towards net zero, and we do not believe a district council can mandate this. If a district heating centre is proposed, where will it be? - These are ugly buildings, so if one is planned the council should be open about its possible location. The controversial energy centre at Clapperbrook Lane is a case in point.

11. Theme six – Connectivity of the City Centre

Thinking about Connectivity of the City Centre, please rank which priority actions are of greatest importance to you, where number 1 is of greatest importance.

The opening statements are fine but the following priority actions fail to include an emphasis on cycle routes in/out of the city centre, and reducing the number of non-essential vehicle journeys. More P&R and the use of the existing sites with advanced signage is needed (but of course outside the centre, and probably outside the city itself) and a reduction of work based parking for those who do not need a car for work will help reduce daily congestion. The council's car park strategy should be reviewed as part of a joined up strategy to reduce car use.

For the final priority, the bus station needs to be added, but central station can be removed as that is already improved, unless there are more improvement plans.

There's no mention of the lack of a coach station or improvements to the bus stops that serve coaches, or the need for more rail services to bring people into the city rather than using private cars.

Measuring Success.

Whilst in parts of the Strategy it mentions that the City Council will take the lead, we are disappointed that on page 35, Measuring Success, you delegate the responsibility, accountability and delivery to 'the Business Growth and Economy Group of the Exeter Partnership', a non-democratically formed body, which despite some claims when it emerged from the previous Liveable Exeter Partnership, is still not inclusive and has not reached out to the community. We accept that their advocacy will be useful, but leadership should sit with the council which is accountable. In this paragraph, as in the whole document, it remains unclear what is meant by 'key city centre stakeholders and partners'. Perhaps some clarity can be added as each action point may involve different partners.

As the preeminent organisation for the built environment in the city we would welcome the opportunity to become a partner / stakeholder in developing the City Centre Strategy.

Yours sincerely

K Lewis

Keith Lewis. Chairman