North Street Improvements: 'Vision' Document

Introduction

This document is an interim report of outcomes from two workshops run by Exeter Civic Society which invited the business community and residents in North Street, as well as local Councillors. The paper provides early indications of the direction of travel for improvements in North Street. During the two workshops a steering group formed that hopes to build on these discussions. **It will be necessary to refine and develop these proposals further.** This document was submitted to Exeter City Council and Devon County Council at this stage due to the imminent decisions that will impact the future of this area, in particular the outcome of the Mary Arches Car-park Redevelopment to be determined shortly. The workshop participants wish to provide the developer and the Councils with a Vision for North Street and related suggestions regarding the wider area.

Since its foundation in 1961 Exeter Civic Society has responded regularly to all planning applications in Exeter. In 2022, we organised workshops in the Water Lane area and brought local interest together to develop a 'Wider Water Lane Prospectus', which was used as a stepping stone for what then became the Water Lane SPD.

We now think it is time to do something similar for North Street. Various initiatives in the area have identified that this is a good time to actively look into how to improve North Street. Local developer Nooko has refurbished Paternoster House and brought it back to its former beauty, securing Søstrene Grene as a flagship store and creating inner-city high-end residential flats. The next two buildings on the western side are currently undergoing substantial modernisation. The proposed replacement buildings for Mary Arches Car-park are now in the planning phase. All of this change highlights that this is the time not only to focus on individual sites, but also develop comprehensive plans on how to improve the street overall and perhaps the wider area. Changes can be realised in an incremental approach over the next years, as funds can be sought for from developer contributions and be requested from council budgets and potential other inner-city improvements funding opportunities.

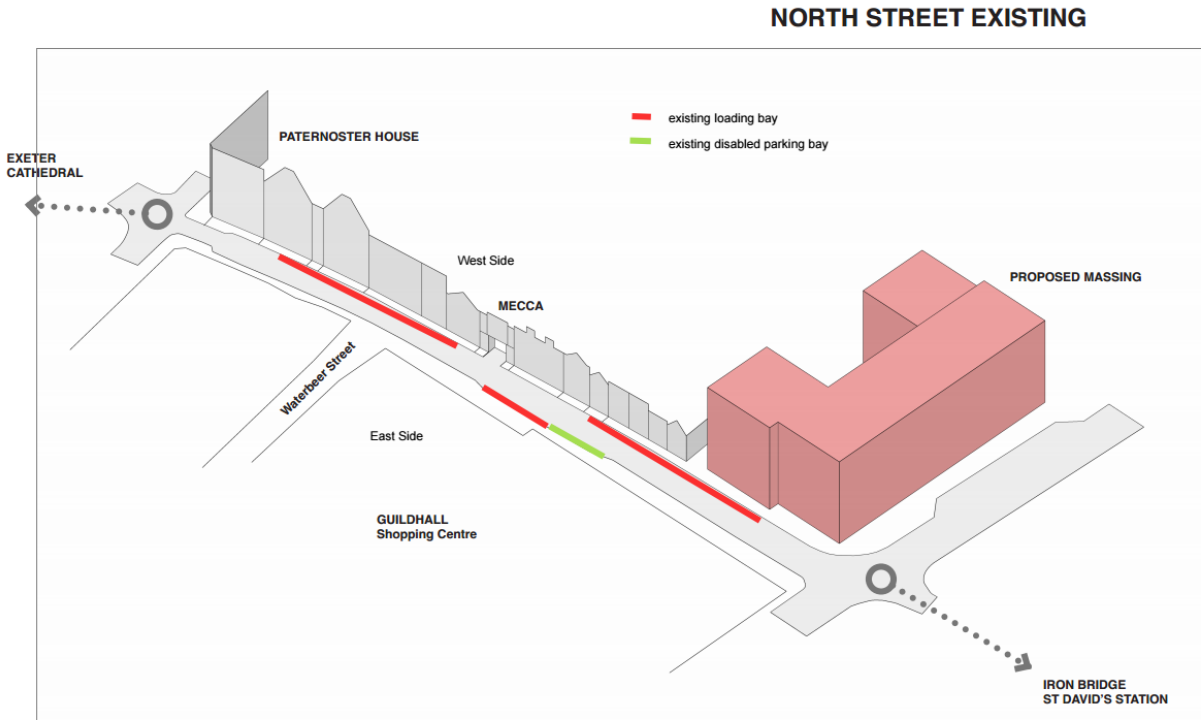
As a first step on this journey, Exeter Civic Society assembled *a Steering Group* to discuss improvements in North Street and the adjacent area. In two workshops on 21 Aug and 23 Sep 2025 ideas were collected, grouped and prioritised. InExeter supported the initiative and helped to inform and invite the businesses in North Street, including the City Gate Hotel management; crucial partners were able to join the 1st workshop and have since stayed in contact with or joined our initiative. Local ECC and DCC Councillors took part in both workshops, the ECC Urban Designer joined the 2nd workshop. A number of private residents took part in both workshops. This means the steering group represents a good cross-section of local interests albeit not a full spectrum of all user voices. **We are fully aware that what happened so far is not a consultation, but the preparatory step for running a co-design and engagement process to develop a comprehensive design for the street.**

Results from Workshops 1 and 2

What is this about? North Street has been one of the major streets in the city centre since Roman times and a prominent north-south thoroughfare. The North Street/South Street junction with High

Street and Fore Street is a reminder of the Roman Crossroads that were a central feature of walled roman towns in the UK. It has played an important role for Exeter's city centre over the centuries. The 1970 saw parts of North Street being redeveloped; what was then perceived as the 'Golden Heart Project' today is acknowledged as not producing sympathetic design or enhancement for a 21st century idea of inner-city planning. The parts of North Street not included in the 1970s redevelopment have become neglected over the decades and are now in a poor state. Recent investments in the street, however, show the potential and willingness for improvement. Local business is lobbying for change, as it needs support to secure its future in this place. Perceptions of how such a vital inner-city street could look like have changed considerably and this now needs to be reflected in possible improvements.

On the basis of the results from the two workshops, Exeter Civic Society and the assembled steering group are developing **a Vision for North Street**, supported by a series of **Objectives** and **Suggested/Exemplary Measures**. The texts under 1 and 2 represent a first version of this. Under 3 we present suggestions to inform (with some urgency) ECC's planning officers' report on this pending planning application for the Mary Arches Car-park Redevelopment.



1 Vision for North Street

A. North Street, the major north south thoroughfare in Exeter since Roman times, **needs to recapture and reimagine its lost identity**. The road has been linking the North and the South Gate till their demolitions and remained an important corridor after. Since 1834-35 it has been approached from the north by the still existing and Grade II Listed Iron Bridge. C19 buildings still feature in the upper and west middle section of the street and there are hidden remains of timber framed Tudor houses in its alleyways. All of this is defining the historic fabric of the street, a potential that can be reimagined and used to recreate its lost identity for the 21st century.

B. North Street **needs support to reach its full potential as business destination**. The street has dormant business opportunities. New communities started to move into the street. There is also an opportunity to encourage visitors to the city that currently pass-by at the High Street and Fore Street junction to be enticed to explore further. North Street is close to the drop-off points for tourist coaches in South Street and has an access to and from the Guildhall Shopping Centre via Waterbeer Street. Despite this good connectivity, existing businesses say they urgently need to be stabilised by increasing the footfall from passers-by who currently do not want to walk down this dark and dilapidated looking street. New residents of the Mary Arches Car-park Redevelopment need to be encouraged to use 'their street' for shopping, eating out and services. The loss of 'The Conservatory' restaurant shows the real danger other eatery businesses face; on the other hand, the establishment of a successful new bakery shop on the upper eastern side underlines the business potential. North Street presents an opportunity to develop as a more diverse shopping, eatery and service street, more active and more engaging for residents old and new as well as passers-by.

C. North Street in its current diversification process **must increase its street use and scene** from a street which over recent decades has been increasingly dominated by car-use and apparently outdated loading bays to a street which will more equally sustain all users, pedestrians, cyclists, visitors and residents included. The 'Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan' (LCWIP) has North Street as part of the E20 cycle route and one of the priority walking routes; with work on Iron Bridge concluded, North Street has now become a vital underdeveloped section of this link between St Davis's train station and the Topsham Road corridor.

D. **North Street can become an inner-city street where people want to live.** This street with its existing housing has an opportunity to re-rejuvenate as a mixed-use residential street. The upper storeys of the existing buildings and rear buildings offer potential for residential living above and behind the shops. Current and ongoing improvements on the higher western side introduce modernised flats. With potential co-living units at the lower end of the street and the luxury flats in Paternoster House, a good cross-section of socially diverse homes in this street are being developed. This can be encouraged by sensitive improvements with the aim to support social cohesion of inner-city living.

2 Objectives and Exemplary Measures

It is important to understand that the objectives and measures listed here need to be further developed and tested by specialists and the wider community with the support of a full consultation. What we present below are first ideas and results of the discussions in the steering group.

A. Optimising the use of space in the street by reallocating outdated loading bays. There is agreement that the current positioning and amount of loading bays is not optimal and that it leads to inappropriate use. Increasing the use of space for non-vehicular traffic is seen as a priority (1st priority pedestrian use; 2nd priority cyclist use).

a. The loading bay nearest the High Street junction is used once weekly by Søstrene Grene, and more frequently by others; it needs lengthening in the top section to accommodate the larger delivery vehicle used by Søstrene Grene; the bay is regularly blocked by parked cars. A shared footpath-loading area, reaching further into the double-lined zone next to the traffic lights might help solving the problems in this location subject to further consultation. The road here is too narrow to allow for the widening of footpath on the upper east side but a shared pedestrian and loading bay use on the west side could be effective, as it would free up space for pedestrian use for most of the time and also disengage car parking.
b. A safe crossing of the street to and from Waterbeer Street, maybe as raised road surface, would reduce traffic speed and increase pedestrian safety. With the loss of Mary Arches Street car park users of the North Street businesses are likely to use the Guildhall Car Park; they and co-living residents will require a safe crossing.
c. The 2 disabled parking places could be relocated from the eastern side to the western side, opposite Waterbeer Street, this will enable to look into moving the road further to the eastern side and the freed-up space being used for wider footpaths on the western side.
d. A new drop-off parking place should be added to this zone, with the aim to incentivise cars not to misuse loading bays.
e. All further loading bays on western and eastern side, plus the 2 disabled parking spots on the eastern side could be used for widening footpaths on the western side and for introducing a cycle lane on the eastern side (potentially underneath and alongside shopping centre and car park exit walk way).
f. A widened western side pedestrian area would allow spill-out use for the businesses such as tables and seating during opening hours similar to the successful Magdalen Road improvements.
g. It would make sense to potentially fully remove the footpath on the eastern side from Waterbeer Street to the junction with Paul Street to encourage footfall past the shops and eateries on the active side of the street. The staircase exit from the Guildhall car park could be blocked at the level of the walk way, to direct the users down on a safe way using the ramp.

B. Creating a better business environment by increasing footfall of visitors and encouraging local residents to use their street for shopping, eating and services.
a. Increase incentive to walk down/up North Street by more adequate street layout, including spill out spaces for local businesses on widened footpaths.
b. Add greening measures, such as partial greening of walls on both sides of the street: there could be greening introduced on the ramp leading up to the front entrance of the new Co-Living building which is shown built out to its red line boundary with no room for street enhancements. Planters hanging from the pedestrian ramp to the Guildhall Shopping Centre could be upgraded to a full-style hanging garden along the walkway and ramp with bigger containers, irrigation system and year-round green plants, like trailing ivy. Further greening can help with noise mitigation. Whether greening at the end of Waterbeer Lane could be achieved depends on the use of this area as emergency vehicle access.

c. Make the street look nicer and more welcoming by diversifying the non-active frontage wall of the Guildhall Shopping Centre. Introduce artwork and further breaking up the structure of this wall can add visual impact, for example by installing a tiled mural above the walkway and ramp remembering the lost C19 buildings (material researched by local historian).
d. Increase variety of businesses by an active marketing campaign and short-term inducements.

C. Re-instating the lost identity of the street.
   a. Installing interpretation and information boards, covering all the different historical aspects to be experienced in this street.
   b. Visually connecting North Street to the Iron Bridge by using the same street lighting (see also point E.c.).
   c. Offering a history trail of the area.
   d. Implementing a walking trail from top end of North Street, leading across to the old brewery, the lost North Gate (represented by the Wyvern on the pole), the Iron Bridge, foundry and further down alongside the catacombs to the river with its milling history and leading, along the river and up Fore Street again back to its North Street junction and the drop-off zone for coaches in South Street, thereby creating a pleasant and interesting circular walk.

D. Reducing traffic and improving air and noise pollution in North Street. Consideration should be given to the wider traffic flows that result in the use of North Street for circulation rather than destination. Whilst acknowledging that traffic circulation and access is important in the locality, simple measures could redirect flows and bring substantial benefit to residents and businesses of North Street. Such measures may include one or more of:
   a. Restricting vehicle types on an access only basis, for example HGV's having completed delivery to Guildhall shopping centre currently turn left up North Street to exit the city. These could be redirected via a two-way flowing Mary Arches Street.
   b. Reimagine traffic flows to run from South Street through North Street (change of direction).
   c. Create a (two-way) cycle route along North Street and South Street section of the E20 route.
   d. If the South Street flow is not reversed, then allow tourist coaches via Fore Street to turn right into South Street.
   e. Create a drop off point at the High Street end of South Street for a better visitor experience to approach the Cathedral and possible retention of visitors to the Roman crossroads area.
   f. Ask driver training schools to use these inner-city roads less during training. Residents say there are a lot of these HGVs after the morning delivery time all through the day when the street gets busy with pedestrians and cyclists.

E. Improving the lighting in North Street and its alleyways. The street currently does not feel safe in the dark.
   a. More targeted and directional lighting to improve pedestrian safety as residents and businesses report feeling unsafe after dusk.
   b. Revisiting street light dimming measures.

c. Replacing the few industrial-style very tall street lights by more human-size lanterns as used across the Iron Bridge, thereby drawing a consistent line along the whole length of this thoroughfare and creating a cohesive historic feature even during daylight hours.
d. Lighting alleyways more appropriately (using wall mounted lanterns of the same style to add to visual cohesion of the area).

F. Cleaning and tidying up area and disenfranchise anti-social behaviour.
   a. Finding replacement storage and collection space for commercial bins currently situated in the open area of the Mary Arches car-park and using adequate cladding to conceal bins.
   b. Public bins too small or not often enough emptied.
   c. Look into the adequacy of Guildhall Shopping Centre bin storage and collection near the access ramp and Waterbeer Street.
   d. Replacing existing permanent seating below Waterbeer Street with more adequate (anti-social behaviour resistant) seating in a nicer place: curved line, seat separation.
   e. Encouraging shops at western end of Waterbeer Street to use their windows for more active shop frontage to make the area look more interesting and inviting.
   f. Increasing footfall with its self-regulatory effects will help with this.

3 How the current Mary Arches Redevelopment can support North Street Improvements in its lower part

At this crucial point in time the steering group wish to provide food for thought and suggestions for the ECC Planning Committee decision on the current Planning Application 25/0781/FUL (Demolition of multi-storey car park and construction of a co-living development alongside public realm improvements).

The scale and concentration of new residents generated by the Co-Living development will place increasing demand on local streets, pedestrian and cycle routes and public spaces. It is reasonable and necessary for the developer to contribute financially to deliver targeted mitigation and enhancements that are directly related to the development, fairly apportioned, and compliant with planning policy. Securing contributions through a S106 Agreement ensures timely delivery, appropriate standards and long-term management.

We suggest to seek S106 contributions from the developer to:

1) Provide early release of funds to support a comprehensive co-design engagement process.
2) Fund public realm improvements that enjoy widespread community support evidenced by this co-design engagement process (see point A.).
   Illustrative suggestions from the workshops for areas of improvement to address are:
   a) To integrate greening-up and its maintenance into a newly laid-out footpath along the building's frontage on North Street. This side of the new development is currently the only one without any landscaped features. On the eastern side of North Street, the wall of the shopping centre could be further greened and a tiled mural can add visual impact.

b) To fit out and maintain the newly suggested full height glazed display areas on the corner for displaying interpretation/information boards and historic models of the street which will help to recapture and reimagine the street identity. Information about the Roman Wall (currently only on the opposite corner of the crossroad) needs to be added to, thus highlighting the medieval and early modern history, as well as C19 alterations and additions. Tourists and day visitors could be guided down the street to this interpretation material and start their exploration of the wider area from here.
c) To upgrade the lighting in the street to provide safety for its residents in the hours of darkness. The new development will benefit directly from the improved safety.
d) To provide an improved road crossing at the North Street/Bartholemew Street East junction, by upgrading the existing traffic lights for pedestrian usage. This crossing has to also cater for cyclists moving from north to south across the E20 cycle route across Iron Bridge and then crossing over into North Street, and for pedestrians crossing over to the more active western side of the street.
e) To provide a safe crossing in North Street leading to and from Waterbeer Street, perhaps as a raised road surface. A result of the loss of Mary Arches car park will be increased footfall from the Guildhall Shopping Centre car park. Waterbeer Street will also be a major access point for Co-Living residents to other destinations. This crossing can help to keep the speed level down to the 20mph limit.
f) To widen the western side footpaths from the Co-Living development to Waterbeer Street, this would provide for the increased footfall arising from the new residents.
g) To introduce a cycle lane that would accommodate the increased use of cycling from the Co-Living development. The necessary space could come from relocating the existing loading and disabled parking bays (potentially also including the area underneath the shopping centre walk-way).

Key Benefits of suggested improvements

- **Improved safety** through reduced vehicle speeds, clearer pedestrian crossings and better visibility from upgraded lighting.
- **Enhanced accessibility** via wider footways and continuous tactile surfacing that accommodate prams, wheelchairs and mobility scooters.
- **Health and environment gains** from increased planting that improves air quality and noise mitigation.
- **Place-making and social value** delivered by seating, lighting and high-quality paving that encourage street life and support local businesses.
- **Long-term maintenance efficiency** from durable materials and a coordinated design approach reducing future public costs.

Conclusion and Request

Approving the recommended S106 funding will secure essential public realm improvements that directly offset the development's impacts and deliver measurable safety, accessibility, environmental and social benefits that are fully supported by residents, local businesses and users of North Street.