

From: The Opposition Parties, Exeter City Council
% The Civic Centre, Paris Street,
Exeter, EX1 1JN

To: Alison McGovern MP
Minister of State for Local Government and Homelessness
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Thursday 15th January 2026

Dear Minister McGovern,

Re: Your Letter of December 18th, 2025 to Council Leaders where proposals for reorganisation have been submitted and decisions not yet taken

We are writing to you as Councillor Leaders of all of the opposition parties at Exeter City Council to express our concerns about the Labour administration's request to you to postpone elections in May 2026.

Our collective view is that the rationale we have been presented with lacks sufficient evidence to justify the postponement of elections. Furthermore, we have low confidence that the Labour leader, Cllr Philip Bialyk will adequately express our views to you and that his letter from ECC doesn't fairly represent the views put forward at the Council meeting on Tuesday 13th January.

At our full council meeting, we were presented with a report from our Chief Executive¹ that recommended "the Leader responds to the Minister of State by 15th January 2026 on whether or not to request postponement of the local elections scheduled for May 2026." We note the report suggested that cost savings of £265,000 were possible if elections were postponed, and that this money could be "be allocated to other projects (including LGR) or return to General Reserves."

We have never once, since the wheels of LGR were set in motion, been presented with a single report to suggest that Exeter City Council lacked the resources to deliver both the May 2026 elections and a comprehensive LGR programme. When questioned by the Council at our

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<https://committees.exeter.gov.uk/documents/s102743/Report%20-%20January%202025%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

meeting on January 13th about whether LGR would be at risk if elections went ahead, the Chief Executive said “Staff will do everything they can to deliver LGR.” Nor did the report set out any statement that indicated that Exeter City Council had a specific problem. Your letter stated : *“I am therefore inviting you, by midnight on Thursday 15 January, to set out your views on the postponement of your local election and if you consider this could release essential capacity to deliver local government reorganisation in your area and so allow reorganisation to progress effectively”*.

Without clear evidence that we have a problem or that ‘essential capacity’ is needed to allow reorganisation to progress effectively, the decision by the Leader to ask for a postponement is, in our view, not evidence based and appears to place the interests of the Labour Party above the need for the council going forward to have a democratic mandate.

In his summing up at the end of a nearly three hour debate, it is our view that Cllr Bialyk failed to show to the chamber that he had understood the concerns of fellow councillors who were of a different opinion to his own, and we fear you may receive a partial account of events.

In addition to challenging the evidence base on funding issues, as the annual elections are included in the medium term financial plan approved by Council at the same meeting, we have other other serious concerns which we will summarise here:

Cllr Diana Moore (Green)

The issues of challenges to essential capacity have not been identified in the LGR proposal, transition plan, or risk register. The Chief Executive confirmed at the meeting that preparations had begun for the local elections and the Council would be able to deliver these. The Council undertakes its elections in thirds, and annual elections are a right, not a privilege for our residents.

Cllr Michael Mitchell (Liberal Democrat)

This appears to be an arbitrary decision of self interest by the Labour Party to avoid the citizens of Exeter for the last time before the new councils come into being to express their views about the performance of Exeter City Council.

I would also draw your attention to the offer from Devon County Council in their response to you, to assist with capacity to enable the smooth running of elections.

Cllr Peter Holland (Conservative)

There are no compelling reasons – at this time – as to why the elections should be cancelled. It is my view, which is shared by the wider Conservative Group here in the City, that it is morally

and ethically wrong to cancel what are resident's democratic rights to vote on a 4 year cycle – outside of a National Emergency such as war or a pandemic.

Cllr Zoe Hughes (Equity Independent Group)

Irrespective of how pressing we think our case is for scrapping this May's election, our residents absolutely do not want it. We represent residents, not ourselves. If we do not allow the election to go ahead as it usually does, the people of Exeter will remember this and the damage done to public trust in their elected officials will be immense. Not to mention the irreversible damage it will cause to the Labour Party, who are in enough trouble in the polls as it is!

Lucy Haigh (Equity Independent Group)

While Local Government Reorganisation presents real challenges, Exeter's local elections remain essential to local democracy. Government must ensure Councils are funded to deliver both, rather than forcing a choice between them.

Cllr Tony Payne (Reform UK)

I agree with this letter. I am very concerned that our views WILL NOT BE HEARD and that the full council on the 13th January was an exercise in how democracy doesn't work. I am concerned that the Labour group as a whole have used the fact of the cancellation of elections to try and gain politically.

In summary, we are so concerned about the potential erosion of democratic values in our city, that we have put aside our political differences to write to you with one voice, and ask clearly that elections for Exeter City Council in May 2026 go ahead as budgeted for, planned, and expected by the citizens of our great city.

Yours Sincerely

The Leaders of the Opposition Parties at Exeter City Council:

Cllr Diana Moore (Green)

Cllr Michael Mitchell (Liberal Democrat)

Cllr Peter Holland (Conservative)

Cllrs Zoe Hughes & Lucy Haigh (Equity Independent Group)

Cllr Tony Payne (Reform UK)