

An open letter on the Exeter Cultural Strategy 2026–31

From the residents of Exeter, to Exeter City Council and every elected member of it.

RE

Exeter Cultural Strategy 2026–31 and Exeter City Centre Strategy 2026–31 — Formal Consultation Response and Open Letter

This document is a response to the public consultation on the Exeter Cultural Strategy 2026–31 — and, by necessary extension, the parallel City Centre Strategy 2026–31, which was approved for consultation alongside it on 28 April 2026 and is explicitly framed as its spatial companion — and an open letter to every elected member of Exeter City Council. It is published so that any resident who shares its concerns can read it, draw on it, and respond to the consultation in their own words.

Every claim in this letter is drawn from primary sources: Exeter City Council's own committee papers, external audit reports, commissioned consultants' reports, the council's own emerging Local Plan (Exeter Plan Regulation 19 Publication Draft, currently at examination), Arts Council England publications, government data, and the published record of comparable cities. Sources are listed at the end.

Many residents became aware of this consultation only through independent research — not through any direct communication from the Council. This letter exists because the strategies that have been put to consultation will not, on the evidence, produce the change Exeter needs. And because the moment to put that right is now.

The Exeter That Could Exist

Imagine Exeter not as it is, but as it could be.

A regional capital with the cultural infrastructure that status implies. A purpose-built, integrated centre for the arts in the city centre — about the size of Plymouth's Theatre Royal, roughly 1,500 seats scaling to 2,000–2,500 standing/mixed — combining a flexible performance hall, gallery space of regional national standing capable of hosting major touring exhibitions, and the production infrastructure that supports working artists, musicians, theatre-makers and producers across the disciplines. One building. One institution. Multiple integrated functions. The kind of mid-scale civic arts centre every comparable English city already has, and Exeter does not. (The Barbican is the well-known integrated example; the realistic scale and cost is HOME in Manchester — one building, £25 million, built by a city council in 2015.) A programme of touring music, theatre, comedy and contemporary art that draws people into the city in the evening, every week of the year.

Consider what this absence means week to week. When a major artist, band, comedian or orchestra tours the UK, the routing reads Bristol, Plymouth, Bournemouth, Cardiff — and skips Exeter, because Exeter has no city-centre room big enough to book. Across 2025 and 2026, Bristol Beacon alone has hosted or announced Lily Allen, Suede, Franz Ferdinand, Wet Leg, Kraftwerk, OMD, Mogwai, Happy Mondays, The Stranglers and Sparks — alongside a full orchestral season featuring the London Symphony Orchestra, Sir Simon Rattle and Sir Antonio Pappano. Plymouth Pavilions (now Plymouth Arena) has hosted or announced Chase & Status, Olly Murs, Ocean Colour Scene, Kula Shaker, UB40, Billy Bragg, The 1975 — and a steady stream of the biggest names in comedy: Romesh Ranganathan, Bill Bailey, Alan Carr, Jack Whitehall. Exeter could not stage a single one of them. The city's largest 1,000-plus capacity room is the University's Great Hall, two miles out on campus and not a public civic venue; the city centre itself tops out at the 500-seat Corn Exchange. A regional capital is a place the tour stops. At present, Exeter is a place it drives past — and Exeter's own residents drive to Bristol or Plymouth, spending their evening and their money in another city.

And the flow runs the other way too — which is the part the current strategy overlooks entirely. Exeter is not just a city of its own residents. It is the established regional centre for a wide sub-region of Devon and the wider South West: the Council's own Local Plan records a catchment population of approximately 215,000 within a thirty-minute drive time of the city, characterised as relatively affluent and mobile. People across that sub-region already travel into Exeter — to shop, to use its services, to do business. The willingness to travel to Exeter is a settled fact in the Council's own evidence base. What does not exist is a reason to travel in for the evening, or to stay. A cultural anchor changes precisely that calculation. This is the same distinction this letter has drawn about St Sidwell's Point: a leisure centre serves its local users — no one drives in from across the region to use a swimming pool — whereas a mid-scale cultural venue draws a thirty-to-fifty-mile catchment audience year-round, for touring music, theatre, comedy and major exhibitions. The same sub-region that fills the shops by day would fill the city after dark — and a proportion of those drawn in to spend an evening here are the people who, over time, choose to make Exeter home. The anchor does not only serve Exeter; it captures the cultural and economic life of an entire sub-region that currently has nowhere of scale to spend it, and at present exports that spending to Bristol, Plymouth and beyond.

And around it — and this is the point — an Exeter where the grassroots creative environment that the Cultural Strategy 2026–31 correctly identifies as needed is no longer aspirational but actual. Permanent, affordable artist studios. Rehearsal rooms that aren't in school halls or church basements. Maker spaces in the Cultural Quarters the City Centre Strategy already names but does not yet fund. Galleries above shops. Live-work units in regenerated brownfield sites. A working creative class — sound engineers, lighting technicians, producers, designers, costume makers, illustrators, musicians, writers — supported by year-round paid work and able to afford to stay in the city they trained in. Graduates who can build a career in Exeter rather than leaving for Bristol, Plymouth, or London.

The anchor venue and the grassroots ecosystem are not two separate asks. They are one outcome. The anchor produces the ecosystem. That is what the comparator evidence shows, and it is the single most important point this letter makes.

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Independent restaurants, bars, late cafés and music venues then survive their first three years because there is a reason for people to be in the city centre at seven o'clock. The medieval fabric, the cathedral, the Roman walls, the quay — assets most cities would trade everything for — become the stage for an evening culture, not a tourist daytime curiosity. The students who arrive each autumn — the City Centre Strategy now openly cites a figure of approximately 39,000 students using the city centre during term time — have a city worth staying in after graduation. The graduate retention figure — under 7 per cent at fifteen months, zero net retention by five years according to ECC's own 2022 Employment and Skills research — begins to recover.

This is not fantasy. It is the documented outcome in every city that has made the choice.

Hull was a declining port city losing population and confidence. It hosted UK City of Culture in 2017. By the end of that year it had received 5.3 million cultural visits, attracted £220 million of investment, and reframed itself as a place worth visiting. The legacy was not only the year. Hull 2017 left behind permanent grassroots venues — Humber Street Gallery, Social, the Welly Club, Fruit, the Adelphi — that survived because Hull had become a place worth being in.

Margate built the Turner Contemporary on its seafront in 2011. The gallery has drawn over 4 million visitors and is independently estimated to have generated more than £100 million of economic impact. By Turner Contemporary's own published account, more than 150 new businesses have opened in the surrounding streets as a direct consequence — an ecosystem of independent cafés, galleries, boutiques, studios and makers that did not exist before the anchor was built. Margate's Old Town, until 2011 dotted with empty shops and derelict buildings, is now one of the South of England's most concentrated creative ecosystems. The grassroots came because the anchor came first.

“The grassroots came because the anchor came first.”

Gateshead built BALTIC, a major contemporary art gallery, in a former flour mill on the Tyne in 2002; it has drawn millions of visitors and anchored the regeneration of the Gateshead–Newcastle quayside.

Plymouth — materially poorer than Exeter, with higher deprivation — opened The Box in 2020. A single building. £48 million capital, Heritage Lottery-led. In five years it has generated £244 million of economic footprint, received over 1.1 million visits including 72,000 from international visitors, and produced an estimated £100 million in health and wellbeing benefit (Source: The Box Plymouth First Five Years Impact Report, September 2025). Theatre Royal Plymouth generated £53.3 million of economic impact in 2024–25 alone. Around them, on the harbour and in Royal William Yard, Ocean Studios anchors a permanent creative cluster — exactly the kind of grassroots ecosystem the Exeter strategy says it wants and does not yet have a mechanism to deliver. Plymouth’s anchor effect is delivered through two separate buildings — The Box for visual art, museum and archive; Theatre Royal Plymouth for performance. That is one valid model. It is not the only one.

HOME Manchester is the integrated alternative — and the most directly relevant modern UK precedent for what Exeter should now build. HOME opened in April 2015 as the merger of Cornerhouse (cinema and gallery) and the Library Theatre Company. £25 million capital cost: £19 million from Manchester City Council, £5 million from Arts Council England’s lottery fund, the balance from foundations and fundraising. One building, on First Street, contains two theatres (a 500-seat main house and a 150-seat flexible studio), five cinema screens, 500 square metres of contemporary gallery space, digital production and broadcast facilities, a café-bar and a restaurant. It is, in short, an integrated arts centre at the scale of a regional city — the Barbican’s combine-everything-in-one-building idea, but sized for a city like Exeter and delivered for the cost of half a leisure centre. Exeter, starting from zero and unable to fund two separate anchors at once, must build the integrated form. HOME shows it can be done — recently, in this country, for affordable capital, by a local authority that decided to.

Both Exeter and Norwich hold the same rare honour — UNESCO City of Literature — a permanent international designation given to cities with a serious literary life. Norwich was awarded it in 2012, Exeter in 2019. Same status. Yet Norwich receives £65.44 per head in Arts Council England funding, and Exeter receives £12.92 — five times the backing, for the same title. The difference is not a quirk of the funding formula. It is the difference between a city with the institutional density and infrastructure to attract and absorb cultural investment, and one without. That institutional density is what sustains Norwich’s working creative class — its studios, its indie venues, its makers. It is what Exeter’s grassroots scene would have, if Exeter had what Norwich has.

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The economic evidence base behind this is not theoretical. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s December 2024 Frontier Economics analysis valued the health and wellbeing benefit of cultural engagement at £8 billion a year nationally. Arts Council England’s own research (CEBR for ACE) established a multiplier of £2.01 generated in the wider economy for every £1 paid in cultural sector salaries. The National Arenas Association’s evidence to the 2024 Parliamentary Select Committee on Grassroots Music Venues confirmed that for every 10,000 people who attend a live music event, around

£1 million is spent on food, drink, transport and accommodation in the surrounding area. The DCMS / Ecorys 2014 review of 40 case studies concluded that cultural facilities directly affect “the image and perceptions of an area, increasing its attractiveness as a place to live, work and invest.”

Exeter has the foundations a regional cultural capital needs. UNESCO City of Literature status — a permanent international designation, held by only a handful of cities in the country, awarded to places with a serious literary life; Exeter received it in 2019, Norwich in 2012. A world-class university with over 39,000 students (the figure the City Centre Strategy now openly uses — the same figure ECC’s own planning officers have known since November 2022, even though the December 2024 Regulation 19 Local Plan PBSA policy is still built on the older 27,280 figure). A Cathedral and medieval centre of extraordinary quality. Proximity to Dartmoor, the Jurassic Coast, and the sea. A growing population. The highest cultural and heritage net revenue spend of any shire district in England (£3.3 million against a peer median of £354,000).

What Exeter does not have is the anchor — and therefore does not have the grassroots ecosystem the anchor would produce.

This needs to be said directly, because two existing venues will inevitably be raised in any conversation about Exeter’s cultural infrastructure: the Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Art Gallery (RAMM), owned and operated by ECC; and Exeter Phoenix, the independent arts charity that has been the city’s only multi-disciplinary arts centre for over twenty-five years. Both are valued. Both do important work within their scale and resources. Neither is — and at their current scale, neither can be — a regional cultural anchor of the kind every comparable English city has built.

RAMM is, in its own published description, “Exeter’s world-class museum and art gallery.” The permanent museum collection and core galleries, recently refurbished at substantial cost, are open free to the public and at their own scale that description is defensible. The temporary art gallery, however, is small. It hosts what are necessarily bitesize touring exhibitions, and the funding model required to support them differs from that of larger institutions. It hosts necessarily bitesize touring shows — in 2026, for instance, a modestly scaled Grayson Perry exhibition charged at the door, where larger institutions such as the Arnolfini, Turner Contemporary, The Box, BALTIC or Tate St Ives routinely stage major touring exhibitions free at the point of entry. This is not a criticism of RAMM; it is a statement of scale. RAMM does not, and at its current physical and operational scale cannot, be the regional gallery anchor Exeter lacks.

Exeter Phoenix has been the institutional home of Exeter’s contemporary arts community for over a quarter of a century. Its own published account describes it as “the home of creativity and culture in the city-centre” and as a charity that “supports artists, develops talent, commissions new work, and takes risks.” It operates as a registered charity (Charity Commission no. 290011) raising in excess of £1.5 million each year, the majority through earned income and community fundraising. Its auditorium has a capacity of around 510 (configurable between seated and standing modes — closer to 270 fully seated); its gallery footprint is three rooms. It programmes gigs and events year-round at a provincial scale, and on occasion welcomes a small number of national-level acts. The Phoenix does what it can with the physical and financial resources it has. What it cannot do — and the limitation is structural, not a criticism of those who run it — is host the touring acts, exhibitions and productions that a regional capital city’s anchor is expected to deliver every week: the 1,500-to-2,500-capacity gigs, the major touring contemporary art shows, the larger-scale theatre productions, the kinds of programmes that fill The Box, Turner Contemporary, or HOME Manchester on a continuous basis. The Phoenix is sized to be a mid-scale incubator. The city needs a regional anchor as well.

The case for an integrated anchor is not a case against either institution. The opposite. The comparator evidence is unambiguous: a properly resourced anchor lifts every venue below it. More working artists in the city. More cultural footfall on the streets in the evening. More Arts Council England investment

flowing into the local ecosystem. More reason for graduates to stay. In that future, Exeter Phoenix becomes the mid-scale incubator feeding the anchor's programme; RAMM joins a regional touring gallery circuit that includes the anchor; both grow because the anchor exists. The anchor and the existing infrastructure are not in tension. They are complementary parts of a single cultural ecosystem — but Exeter currently has only the lower tiers of that ecosystem, and the upper tier no city of its status can do without.

Without the anchor, the city stays where it is: a regional capital where the high street empties in the late afternoon and the venues that drew people in have closed or moved to the campus two miles away. ECC's own commissioned 2026 Cultural Strategy Assessment calls this out in its own words. Practitioners told ECC's own consultants that Exeter is a "DIY city" where artists "have to make things happen yourself"; that the city "thrives on the fringe, small-scale work"; that the lack of affordable studio space is "acute"; that talent drain to Bristol, Plymouth, and London is a "structural necessity"; that "young people often have to move away to pursue opportunities and seldom return"; and that what is needed is "something to feed the soil of the city." Residents experience the city as "sedate and sleepy" and describe it as a "gateway to somewhere else, someplace better."

“Practitioners told ECC’s own consultants that Exeter is a “DIY city” where artists “have to make things happen yourself.””

These are not the words of critics. They are in ECC's own commissioned documents. The strategies now under consultation do not answer them. This letter explains what would.

The Roadmap — A Sequenced Path to a Regional Cultural Capital

What follows is a realistic, eight-year delivery sequence built around the structural realities of Arts Council England capital funding (typically 5–7 years from formal expression of interest to opening), the confirmed Local Government Reorganisation timeline (shadow elections May 2027, new Devon unitary authority vesting April 2028), the existing site options in Exeter city centre, and the experience of every comparable English venue built in the last twenty-five years.

This is not aspiration. It is a sequenced delivery path. Each phase has a clear outcome, a clear rationale, and a clear consequence if it is missed. And each phase has been designed to begin producing the grassroots ecosystem the Cultural Strategy Theme 2 (“Connecting with our grass roots”) says it wants — not after opening, but from day one of phase one.

The roadmap is built around three facts. First, the Arts Council England Capital Grant pipeline — the only realistic funding route at this scale — takes years, requires a lead National Portfolio organisation, requires a confirmed site, and requires a local authority committed to the project. Second, the LGR transition produces the most important governance window of the next twenty years: founding strategic priorities for a new Devon unitary authority will be set in 2027 and 2028. Third, Fourth Street’s 2017 cost estimate for a venue of this scale was £40–55 million; updated for construction inflation that is approximately £65–80 million today. ECC spent £45 million of public borrowing on St Sidwell’s Point. A Devon-scale unitary authority can do this. ECC alone could have done this. It chose not to.

Nothing in this roadmap is novel. It is what cities that have built cultural infrastructure have actually done. The only thing missing is the decision to begin.

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PHASE 0 2026 — 2027 (now)

Foundations laid before LGR

Adopt the Cultural Strategy 2026–31 with a binding capital commitment to an integrated multi-use centre for the arts (performance hall and gallery space within a single building, roughly 1,500 seats on the scale of Plymouth’s Theatre Royal, following the integrated HOME Manchester model) and a binding link to the Connected Culture planning policy (Exeter Plan Policy S2 Principle 7) on all strategic brownfield sites. Publish the 2019 Hopkins feasibility study. Formally re-affirm or rescind Extraordinary Council Minute No. 11 (21 January 2020). Open formal dialogue with Arts Council England about the Capital Grant pipeline. Identify the lead cultural organisation. Engage the University of Exeter as co-investor. Place a moratorium on disposing of any city-centre site that could host a venue or permanent creative-industry floorspace. **Grassroots effect from day one:** any strategic brownfield consent in this window must, under Principle 7, include permanent flexible creative-industry space — so the studio, rehearsal, maker and live/work pipeline begins before the anchor is built.

PHASE 1 2027 — 2028 (LGR transition)

Cultural anchor written into the founding programme of the Devon unitary authority

The new authority adopts the cultural venue and the Connected Culture spatial policy as founding strategic priorities. Site secured (Paris Street / Sidwell Street or alternative). ACE Capital Grant pipeline formally opened. Major philanthropic campaign launched. Devon-wide political mandate behind the project. This is the single most important window: founding decisions made now will set the new authority's character for a generation. **Grassroots effect:** the unitary authority's adopted Local Plan inherits and enforces Principle 7 across a Devon-wide brownfield pipeline — creative-industry space becomes a default planning condition, not an exception.

PHASE 2 2028 — 2031 (development)

Planning, design, business case

Refreshed feasibility, full design competition, detailed business plan, planning consent, fundraising campaign concluded, construction tender awarded. ACE pipeline progresses from expression of interest to confirmed capital award. Site preparation begins. Public-facing engagement programme runs in parallel so the venue belongs to the city before a brick is laid. **Grassroots effect:** the first Principle 7 brownfield-consent studio and maker spaces come online in this window, seeding the working creative class the anchor will need on day one of operations.

PHASE 3 2031 — 2033 (construction)

Build

Construction phase. Programming, leadership and operating team built and trained. First cultural partnerships agreed. Marketing and audience-development infrastructure put in place. **Grassroots effect:** paid technical and production roles begin recruiting locally — sound, light, stage, FOH, marketing, design — providing the entry-level career ladder for Exeter graduates the Assessment says is missing.

PHASE 4 2033 — 2034 (opening)

Venue opens

The integrated multi-use centre for the arts opens in the city centre: a flexible performance hall of approximately 1,500 seated capacity scaling to 2,000–2,500 standing/mixed; gallery space of regional national standing; production and rehearsal infrastructure under the same roof. Programmed for roughly 150 ticketed performance events per year alongside a continuous touring exhibition programme. On the documented evidence — every 10,000 live-event attendees produces around £1 million of spending in the surrounding area — performance programming at this scale produces in the order of £18 million per year in surrounding economic activity, before the additional footfall and dwell-time generated by the gallery programme is counted. This is the engine that starts the evening economy. **Grassroots effect:** the night-time and day-time footfall combined makes independent music venues, indie galleries, late cafés and studios financially viable in their first three years — the precondition the Cultural Strategy Theme 2 actions cannot create on their own.

2034 ONWARDS (the anchor effect)

A city worth staying in

Independent restaurants, bars and music venues form an evening ecosystem the city has not had in living memory. Permanent studios, rehearsal rooms and maker spaces — required on every strategic brownfield site by Principle 7 from Phase 0 onwards — now form a connected, visible, fundable creative quarter. Graduate retention begins to recover from a starting point of under 7 per cent. Heritage assets get the attention and footfall that justify their restoration. Exeter becomes a place people travel to — not a place people pass through. This is the grassroots ecosystem ECC's own Cultural Strategy says it wants. It exists because the anchor exists.

The Record — Why Exeter Is Where It Is

The strategies now under consultation do not contain an evaluation of why Exeter is where it is. They contain no lessons-learned section. They do not refer to the City of Culture 2029 bid that ECC submitted on 28 January 2026 and saw rejected before the longlist on 18 March 2026 — six weeks before these strategies were approved for public consultation. They do not refer to the Extraordinary Council resolution of 21 January 2020 that formally committed ECC to redevelop the Corn Exchange as a cultural venue. They do not refer to the three professional venue assessments ECC has commissioned and not acted on. They do not refer to the eleven-year cultural strategy gap that preceded the Cultural Strategy. They do not refer to Arts Council England funding to Exeter declining from above the England average to below it during the period of the previous strategy. And they do not acknowledge that the council's own emerging Local Plan already contains, in policy S2 Principle 7 (Connected Culture), an explicit requirement for strategic brownfield development to provide flexible space for the creative industries — a policy nobody is enforcing, and which neither strategy now under consultation invokes.

What follows is the documented record. Every statement is drawn from ECC's own committee papers, ECC's own commissioned research, ECC's own emerging Local Plan, the National Audit Office, the Information Commissioner's Office, Arts Council England, and the published primary source record of the institutions named.

3.1 The Art School: 153 Years, Then Demolition

Exeter College of Art and Design was founded in 1854 inside what is now the Royal Albert Memorial Museum. For 153 years it provided degree-level arts education in this city — fine art, graphic design, fashion, illustration, sculpture, photography. It was the seed of Exeter's cultural ecosystem.

In 2007, the University of Plymouth opened the Roland Levinsky Building — a purpose-built £34 million arts faculty on its Plymouth campus. The arts faculty, until then based in Exeter and Exmouth, transferred to Plymouth. Four years later, in 2011, Exeter City Council granted planning permission to demolish the art school's building at Earl Richards Road North and replace it with 39 dwellings. The physical home of a century and a half of Exeter's creative life was demolished for housing.

ECC's own 2026 Cultural Strategy Assessment — the evidence base for the strategy now being consulted upon — describes the loss of Exeter's art school as a "tragedy." It is the council's own word, in the council's own commissioned document, nineteen years after the loss. Exeter College, a different institution, re-established a smaller school of art in 2016 at further-education level. It does not draw students from across the United Kingdom. It is not Plymouth's Levinsky.

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A material consequence: were the same planning decision proposed today, it would arguably fail Policy C1 of the emerging Exeter Plan, which states that “in most cases, the loss of existing cultural and tourism facilities will not be acceptable” and requires planning applications to “include such evidence which should reference all possible sources of finance available.” That policy did not exist in 2011. ECC has since adopted (in emerging form) a planning standard against which its own 2011 decision would fail. The Cultural Strategy 2026–31 does not name this.

3.2 Eleven Years Without a Strategy

ECC’s last formally adopted cultural strategy before 2026 was the Exeter Cultural Action Plan 2013–2015, adopted at Executive on 26 November 2013. The decision record (IssueDetails IId=23412, committees.exeter.gov.uk) commits ECC to bring “a report updating Members on progress with the Action Plan” back to committee. No such update is recorded.

The 2019–24 Place-based Cultural Strategy was commissioned by Exeter Culture — not ECC — and was never formally adopted at an ECC committee meeting. ECC’s own April 2026 Executive Report (s104543) confirms ECC “recognised the importance of updating the Strategy” only when the 2019–24 version ended. ECC had no formally adopted cultural strategy of its own for eleven years.

Across those eleven years ECC made major capital decisions, approved hundreds of planning applications for student accommodation, published Vision 2040 in December 2019 declaring that Exeter would be “known nationally and internationally as a city of culture,” and continued to describe itself in corporate plans as a city of culture — all without the basic governance document that would have defined what that meant, who was accountable, and how progress would be measured.

3.3 Three Professional Assessments. No Venue.

ECC has commissioned three professional assessments of Exeter’s cultural venue gap. None has resulted in a venue.

In 2015 a concept study confirmed the case for a 900-seat replacement venue on the Corn Exchange site, costed at £28 million.

In September 2017 the New Entertainment Venue Advisory Group (NEVAG) commissioned a full Needs Assessment from Fourth Street (specialist arts and culture consultancy). The report — publicly available on ECC’s committee portal, reference s60616 — found unmet demand at the 1,000-plus seat scale; recommended a venue of 1,200 seats (seated) or 2,000–2,500 (standing/mixed); identified the ECC-owned Corn Exchange as the preferred site; and put the capital cost at £40–55 million at 2017 prices. It explicitly named the “4pm exodus” — the phenomenon of Exeter emptying on Friday afternoons — as the structural problem a venue would address. It also stated explicitly that venues of this kind “are rarely privately financed — public sector, lottery, and third-sector funding is the typical model for this kind of venue.” The decision chain is on record: Place Scrutiny 9 November 2017, Executive 14 November 2017 (Item 98), Full Council 19 December 2017 (Minute 77).

In 2019 ECC commissioned Fourth Street again, this time with Hopkins Architects, for a full feasibility study and a 25-year business plan. The study found 70 per cent public support for a new venue and a viable business case. ECC’s stated public position after the study was that the venue “could not be built with public funds alone.” This directly contradicted the 2017 study’s explicit finding — by the same consultancy — that these venues “are rarely privately financed.” The 2019 study has never been published. Residents are being asked to comment on a Cultural Strategy whose own commissioned evidence base, paid for with public money, remains unpublished.

3.4 The Unrevoked Resolution

On 21 January 2020, an Extraordinary Meeting of Exeter City Council adopted Minute No. 11 — New Performance Venue and Redevelopment of the Corn Exchange. The full text:

"The Leader confirmed the Council's commitment to re-develop the Corn Exchange and of the intention to consult the relevant Scrutiny Committee."

Moved by Leader Councillor Bialyk. Seconded by Deputy Leader Councillor Sutton. Carried.

This was a formal council resolution. Not an aspiration. Not a vision statement. Two months later, on 23 March 2020, the UK entered its first COVID-19 lockdown. The commitment was never formally revived. It was never formally rescinded. As of May 2026 it sits on the public record as an unrevoked council resolution that has not been acted upon. The Corn Exchange continues to operate as a 500-capacity venue running near break-even (£1.228 million turnover, £9,000 net loss, 2023–24 accounts).

The strategies now under consultation make no reference to Minute No. 11. It is, in the institutional record, as if the commitment was never made.

3.5 The Capital Spent on Something Else: St Sidwell's Point

Fourth Street's 2017 estimate for a major cultural venue was £40–55 million. ECC spent approximately £45 million of public borrowing on the St Sidwell's Point leisure centre.

The trajectory: £19.4 million (December 2014); £26 million enhanced Passivhaus scheme (Executive, 11 August 2015, MId=4668 — a restricted item voted through 4–1); £39.92 million (July 2017); £43.8 million at tender (late 2018); final cost approximately £44–45 million. The budget more than doubled, with no full-council vote at any point in the escalation.

ECC borrowed £36 million from the Public Works Loan Board; £33.7 million remains outstanding. The 2024–25 Grant Thornton audit found SSP's valuation in the accounts materially wrong — the wrong land area was used (3.26 acres, not 0.77) — leaving it valued at £40.6 million against a £45 million build cost. The investment case that justified its location, Phase 1 of the £300 million Citypoint development, was declared dead by ECC in September 2024.

Fourth Street's 2017 cost estimate for a cultural venue is the same range as the capital that was built. ECC spent the money on a leisure centre and concluded the cultural venue could not be afforded.

3.6 Planning Decisions That Closed the Door — and the Policy Nobody Enforces

Planning decisions have actively reduced the options. The 2017 NEVAG assessment evaluated eleven city-centre locations; Mary Arches Street car park was on its shortlist. In April 2026 ECC approved 297 co-living units on that site — the earlier assessment not referenced in the committee papers.

Mary Arches sits in the West Quarter — one of the four cultural "themed quarters" (West, Castle, Cathedral, Grecian) the City Centre Strategy 2026–31 itself names, and within which it commits to "celebrate and encourage performing arts." Yet the Mary Arches approval and the City Centre Strategy came from the same council in the same month, on neighbouring agenda items. Neither acknowledged the other.

More structurally: the council's own emerging Local Plan — the Exeter Plan Regulation 19 Publication Draft, currently at examination — contains Policy S2 (Liveable Exeter principles). Principle 7 of that policy is named "Connected Culture." It commits ECC to require, on every strategic brownfield development site, that development must:

- use cultural enhancements and provision to improve development quality;
- support local economic growth by providing flexible space for creative industries;
- create resilient, adaptable, networked communities and successful centres that support civic pride and express local identity;
- support high quality cultural placemaking projects in the public realm and community facilities to achieve exemplary social value and environmental quality;
- safeguard, promote access to, and reflect, cultural heritage in local placemaking; and
- harness Exeter's rich heritage, local identities and creative talent through civic participation in culture and by supporting 'meanwhile uses'.

The Plan states explicitly: "Developments that fail to achieve the standards set out in these principles will be refused." This is policy ECC has published in its own emerging Local Plan. It is currently at examination. The Mary Arches planning committee report did not demonstrate compliance with Principle 7. Across the strategy period 2019–2026, ECC approved thousands of purpose-built student accommodation beds across the city centre — many on sites that could have accommodated cultural uses — without, in the public record, demonstrating Principle 7 compliance. By February 2026, 16,935 PBSA and co-living bedspaces had been built, approved, or were in the pipeline (Exeter Civic Society audit). ECC's own planning officer told a September 2025 committee that the city had exceeded its own target for student accommodation by 103 per cent. Three further schemes were approved in the months that followed.

PBSA carries no affordable-housing obligation; co-living requires only 20 per cent at 80 per cent of market rent, against the 35 per cent obligation on standard residential under Core Policy CP7. So every city-centre site turned over to PBSA or co-living yields no affordable housing, no council tax, and — because Principle 7 is not enforced — no creative-industry space. Exeter has 5,267 student-exempt dwellings (Class N), the fourth highest in England, behind only the much larger Leicester, Coventry and Bristol.

The pattern is not historical. On 4 June 2026 — while this consultation was open — the Planning Committee agreed to reduce the affordable-housing provision on the former Devon and Cornwall Police headquarters site on Heavitree Road (399 student bedspaces and 414 co-living studios in blocks of up to six storeys, application 25/0676). The affordable figure set when permission was granted in December 2025 was 83 units, being 20 per cent of the co-living element. The developer, invoking Vacant Building Credit, sought to cut this to 39. After what officers described as a "significant disagreement" over how that credit was calculated, the committee settled on 61 affordable homes — or 60 plus a cash contribution of just over £10,000 towards affordable housing elsewhere — having been advised that insisting on more would be difficult to defend at appeal. The committee chair recorded that the original 83 units had been his "base point." No reference to Principle 7, and no creative-industry space, appears anywhere in the committee record for this site. A major brownfield development, squarely within the scope of the council's own Connected Culture policy, had its affordable-housing obligation reduced and its cultural obligation treated as if it did not exist.

Neither strategy now under consultation references Policy S2 or Principle 7. A council-owned Cultural Strategy that does not anchor its grassroots ambitions on its own council-published planning policy that already requires flexible creative-industry space on strategic brownfield sites is a structural disconnect. Either Principle 7 is operative — in which case the Cultural Strategy should bind its Theme 2 actions to its enforcement — or it is rhetorical, in which case ECC is publishing a Local Plan policy it has no intention of enforcing.

3.7 The Funding Decline

Arts Council England investment in Exeter has declined from above the England average to below it during the period of the previous strategy. In 2024–25 Exeter received £12.92 per head of population in ACE funding against an England average of £13.48. Norwich received £65.44 per head. Nottingham £38.22. Oxford £33.37. Exeter — UNESCO City of Literature, regional capital, host of a world-class university — sits below the national average.

ECC's own commissioned 2026 Assessment states directly: "The previous loss of modest core funding grants from Exeter City Council has increased the risk of organisational failure." The council that describes Exeter as a city of culture has been cutting core funding to Exeter's cultural organisations during the strategy period.

3.7a What Ambition Looks Like, 40 Miles Away

In the same period Exeter produced two strategies that commit no money and name no venue, Plymouth City Council published "Igniting Plymouth's Creative Spark" — a creative-industries strategy that names its delivery partners (The Box, Theatre Royal Plymouth, Arts University Plymouth, the University of Plymouth), commits to creative clusters across the city, and to a physical Plymouth Production Park expanding the city's production capacity. Plymouth has higher deprivation than Exeter. It also has The Box, Royal William Yard, Ocean Studios, an Arts University — and, since 2007, Exeter's arts degrees. The contrast is not that Plymouth is a rival. It is that Plymouth, with less money, decided to act and put the decision in writing, while Exeter's strategies state, in their own words, that "there are no financial implications arising from the recommendation."

3.8 The Bid, the Erasure, and £8.3 Million Going to Plymouth

On 28 January 2026 ECC submitted an expression of interest for the UK City of Culture 2029 competition. The bid was rejected on 18 March 2026 before the longlist of nine cities. Panel chair Sir Phil Redmond's only specific positive in his public feedback was the bid's focus on "health and wellbeing" — not cultural infrastructure, not venue capacity, not heritage. In a competition for a city of culture.

The bid's strapline was "a city of creative confidence" — the same phrase at the centre of the Cultural Strategy now under consultation. The two documents were written in parallel. The April 2026 Executive Report (s104543) that approved this strategy for public consultation was published six weeks after the rejection. It contains no mention of the bid or its outcome. The most significant test of ECC's cultural ambition in a generation has been erased from the institutional record.

On 14 April 2026 — six weeks ago — the Government announced £127.8 million for 130 cultural venues, museums and libraries as the first tranche of a £1.5 billion Arts Everywhere Fund. The list of recipients includes:

- Theatre Royal Plymouth: £8,356,000
- The Lowry Centre, Salford: £8,500,000
- BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead: £3,649,800
- Wiltshire Creative: £3,000,000

Exeter received nothing.

Not because Exeter was ineligible. Because there is no major cultural organisation in the city with a capital project in the pipeline ready to apply. There is no venue. There is no organisation of the scale required. There is no project for ACE to fund. The next Arts Everywhere Fund tranches will open over the next two years. The Capital Grant route is open. Exeter cannot use it because there is nothing to use it for.

This is what the absence of a venue costs. Not in the abstract. In actual money. Right now.

3.9 Two Strategies, One Circle — and a Custom House Nobody Programmes

The Cultural Strategy 2026–31 and the City Centre Strategy 2026–31 were approved for public consultation at the same Executive meeting on 28 April 2026 and published on the same day, 18 May 2026. They are explicitly framed as a pair. The City Centre Strategy provides the physical and spatial frame; the Cultural Strategy provides the programme and sector frame. In principle they are complementary.

In practice they are circular. The City Centre Strategy Theme 4 (Destination Offer) lists “Develop a new Cultural Strategy” as Priority Action 1 — it delegates culture to the Cultural Strategy. The Cultural Strategy Theme 2 (Connecting with our grass roots) references Exeter Plan brownfield regeneration as the spatial mechanism for delivering live/work maker space — it delegates physical space to the Local Plan. The Local Plan, via Policy S2 Principle 7 (Connected Culture), requires flexible creative-industry space on strategic brownfield sites. Neither strategy references Policy S2 or Principle 7. Nobody completes the loop.

Neither strategy commits any money. Both Executive Reports state explicitly: “There are no financial implications arising from the recommendation.” The Cultural Strategy action plan, investment plan, and Monitoring and Evaluation Plan are all to be developed after adoption. The City Centre Strategy Action Tracker is also still being developed. ECC is consulting the public on two strategies whose delivery mechanisms have not been written.

A specific case study of the strategies’ inability to act on what they themselves say: the Custom House. The Cultural Strategy Assessment (page 19) describes the Custom House as “under-used” and groups it explicitly under “Mismanaged Assets.” The City Centre Strategy lists the Custom House as one of the city’s valuable historic buildings in the Cathedral Quarter. The Cultural Strategy Theme 4 names “celebration of the city’s heritage assets” as a Strategic Outcome. ECC owns the Custom House. Neither strategy commits to a use, a programme, or a delivery plan for it. The cultural sector publicly tells ECC the Custom House is being mismanaged. The strategies refer to it as an asset and do not address it.

A second example of strategic disconnect: the Cultural Compact. The Reg 19 Exeter Plan (October 2023, paragraph 12.10) states: “Exeter has established a Cultural Compact with support from Arts Council England. The Compact puts value and the importance of the arts at the centre of Exeter’s future.” The 2026 Cultural Strategy refers instead to the Connected Culture Theme Group of the Exeter Partnership as the strategic leadership and advocacy body. The Compact has been dissolved or

rebranded. The Plan and the Strategy reference different bodies. Neither document acknowledges the transition. Anyone reading the Reg 19 Plan in 2026 will not know that the Cultural Compact cited as a current institution has been replaced.

A third: the student headcount. The City Centre Strategy 2026–31 cites “approximately 39,000 students using the city centre during term time.” The Reg 19 Exeter Plan PBSA policy is still built on the older University-supplied 27,280 figure, even though ECC’s own planning officers have known since November 2022 that the real number is closer to 39,000 (a position established by Exeter Observer’s FOI work). The same council, in two strategic documents published within months of each other, uses two different student headcounts. This is not a typo. It is the same data point counted twice by the same institution for two different purposes.

What this shows: ECC does not have a cultural strategy disconnected from its planning policy. It has two strategies and a planning policy that each reference the others without anyone, anywhere, owning the join. This is not a drafting problem. It is the structural condition that the eleven-year gap has produced.

Conditions for Adoption

The Cultural Strategy 2026–31 (and, by extension, the City Centre Strategy 2026–31, which is its spatial companion) will come to Full Council for adoption following the close of consultation on 29 June 2026. They must not be adopted in their current form. The Cultural Strategy as drafted contains no capital commitment, no reference to the January 2020 resolution, no published evaluation of why the previous strategy's commitments were not met, no formal delivery mechanism with a budget, and no binding link to Policy S2 / Principle 7 of the council's own emerging Local Plan. The City Centre Strategy delegates culture back to the Cultural Strategy and commits no capital. Together they are circular.

The following six conditions are submitted as a formal consultation response. The strategy as adopted must address all six. Anything less continues the pattern of aspiration without delivery this letter has documented.

1. A binding capital commitment to an integrated multi-use centre for the arts. The adopted strategy must contain a stated intention to initiate the Arts Council England Capital Grant pipeline for a purpose-built, integrated multi-use centre for the arts in Exeter city centre — an integrated mid-scale arts centre of approximately 1,500 seats (2,000–2,500 standing), on the scale of Plymouth's Theatre Royal or Canterbury's Marlowe, and following the integrated single-building model of HOME Manchester — that combines, within a single building and a single institution, both a flexible performance hall of approximately 1,500 seated capacity scaling to 2,000–2,500 standing/mixed (consistent with the Fourth Street 2017 Needs Assessment), and gallery space of regional national standing capable of hosting major touring contemporary art exhibitions. Both, not either. The strategy must identify a lead cultural organisation and a candidate site, with the formal process opening before the Local Government Reorganisation transition begins. Aspiration without capital is what produced the eleven-year gap. The strategy must not extend it.

2. Formal resolution of Extraordinary Council Minute No. 11 (21 January 2020). The Council must either re-affirm its commitment to redevelop the Corn Exchange as a cultural venue, or bring a formal motion to rescind that resolution to Full Council with a stated reason. Six years of institutional silence on a resolution the elected council formally adopted is not acceptable.

3. Publication of the 2019 Hopkins feasibility study. Public money was spent on it. It is directly relevant to the strategy now being consulted upon. It must be published as part of the strategy's evidence base, or ECC must explain formally why it remains unpublished after seven years. An FOI request will follow if it is not published voluntarily.

4. A published evaluation of the 2019–24 strategy. Before the 2026–31 strategy is adopted, ECC must publish an evaluation of why the specific commitments in the 2019–24 strategy (Creative Enterprise Zone for South Street and Fore Street; Cultural Capital Master Plan; new performance venue on the bus station site; re-birth of the Exeter School of Art model) were not met. A council that does not acknowledge the failure of the previous strategy cannot credibly claim to have a credible new one.

5. A moratorium on the loss of culture-eligible city-centre sites. Until the Cultural Strategy is adopted with a binding capital commitment and the ACE Capital Grant pipeline is formally opened, ECC must place a moratorium on disposing of any further city-centre site that could host a major venue. The Mary Arches decision in April 2026 is the most recent example of a site once shortlisted in a venue study being approved for development that closes that option permanently. Further losses must stop.

6. Binding the Cultural Strategy's grassroots Theme 2 to enforced delivery of the Connected Culture planning policy. The adopted Cultural Strategy must, in its text, bind itself to the enforcement of Policy S2 / Principle 7 (Connected Culture) of the emerging Exeter Plan on all strategic brownfield development sites — meaning permanent flexible creative-industry floorspace (live/work studios, rehearsal rooms, maker space, gallery space) must be required as a planning condition on every strategic brownfield consent, rather than being delivered, if at all, through temporary meanwhile uses. The Cultural Strategy's three Theme 2 strategic actions must, in addition, be costed and budgeted before adoption rather than after. A grassroots theme without a permanent space mechanism and without a budget is not a strategy: it is a wish.

These six conditions are minimal. They do not in themselves build the venue. They do not in themselves create the grassroots ecosystem. They make it possible to begin.

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“These six conditions are minimal. They do not in themselves build the venue. They make it possible to begin.”

A Word to Councillors

The Cultural Strategy 2026–31 and the City Centre Strategy 2026–31 will both come to Full Council for adoption following the close of this consultation. No single party holds a majority on the current Council, which means that on any contested vote the decision rests with members across the chamber, not with one administration alone. Every member therefore has the power to make their support conditional on the strategies containing real commitments rather than aspirations.

The six conditions set out above are the minimum. They are evidence-based and politically deliverable. They offer a concrete platform to demand change rather than rejecting the strategies and being left without one. Condition 6 in particular — binding grassroots delivery to the enforced application of the Council's own Connected Culture planning policy — costs the Council nothing it has not already published in policy. It only requires that the policy be applied.

There is a commitment already on the Council's own record to build on. The Extraordinary Council resolution of 21 January 2020 committed this Council to redevelop the Corn Exchange as a cultural venue. It was moved by the Leader of the Council and seconded by the Deputy Leader, and carried. Six weeks later, COVID arrived. Six years on, the resolution remains unrevoked and unactioned. Re-affirming it now — with a concrete delivery path attached — would be the single most significant act of cultural leadership any Exeter administration has taken in this century. It does not need to be invented. It needs to be restored to the agenda the Council once carried.

Responding to the City of Culture rejection on 18 March 2026, the Council stated publicly that it would “use the momentum of the City of Culture bid and the new strategy to put culture at the heart of Exeter.” That momentum is here. The strategies under consultation are the test of whether the language meant anything.

The cultural function at the Council has changed hands repeatedly — seven holders of the cultural brief in ten years, and a standalone Culture portfolio only since May 2024. That instability is itself one of the reasons no cultural strategy has been sustained. Whoever holds the brief is also the person under whom the Connected Culture policy (Principle 7) will, or will not, be enforced in practice. Continuity of purpose, not just of post, is what the evidence in this letter shows has been missing.

When these strategies come to Full Council, members will vote on the record. The record will be permanent. The decision will be inherited by the new Devon unitary authority in 2028. Whatever the new authority decides about a cultural venue and the wider creative environment of Exeter, it will start from the strategies adopted now. Strategies adopted with no capital commitment, no reference to the Corn Exchange resolution, no evaluation of why the last strategy failed, no published evidence base, and no

binding link to the Council's own Connected Culture planning policy will leave the new authority starting from a position of institutional silence. Strategies adopted with the six conditions above met give the new authority a foundation it can build on. The decision belongs to the members who cast the vote.

“When these strategies come to Full Council, members will vote on the record. The record will be permanent.”

The Choice

ECC's own commissioned 2026 Assessment describes Exeter as a city people experience as "sedate and sleepy," a "gateway to somewhere else, someplace better." Practitioners describe Exeter as a "DIY city" where artists "have to make things happen yourself"; the lack of affordable studio space is "acute"; talent drain is a "structural necessity"; what is needed is "something to feed the soil of the city." These are the words on the record. They name the gap between Exeter's assets and Exeter's reality.

The evidence for why that gap exists is on the same record. A 153-year-old art school lost in 2007, its building demolished for housing in 2011, its loss now described in the council's own assessment as a "tragedy." Three professional venue studies commissioned and not acted on. A formal council resolution in January 2020 unrevoked and unactioned. £45 million of public borrowing spent on a leisure centre whose investment case has been declared dead. £8.3 million of national capital funding announced on 14 April 2026 — six weeks ago — and not one pound of it could come to Exeter because there is nothing here to fund. An eleven-year gap in cultural strategy. ACE funding declining below the England average during the period of the previous strategy. A planning regime that has approved 16,935 student bedspaces and lost the sites that could have housed the venue — and has done so while the council's own emerging Local Plan policy requires those sites to provide flexible space for the creative industries. A City of Culture bid praised for health and wellbeing — a leisure-centre vocabulary offered in a competition for a city of culture. A built heritage stock with Rougemont Castle, the medieval Norman castle of Exeter, classified as at risk of decay since 2024 alongside the Roman city walls — added to the Heritage at Risk Register in the same year ECC submitted its City of Culture bid. A Custom House the cultural sector publicly says is mismanaged and the strategies do not address. A grassroots ecosystem the Cultural Strategy correctly identifies as needed and structurally cannot deliver — because the only mechanism that produces such an ecosystem is the anchor the strategy will not commit to.

Hull, Margate, Plymouth, Salford, Gateshead, Norwich, Leicester, Manchester, Bristol. These cities are not better resourced than Exeter. Some are materially poorer. They built what they built because their leaders chose to. The choices are documented. The funding routes are open. The Connected Culture policy is published. The window — through the LGR transition into the founding programme of the new Devon unitary authority — is now.

This consultation is either the beginning of a different chapter, or the continuation of the record it has inherited. Every councillor who votes to adopt these strategies without the six conditions above will be voting for the record to continue.

Exeter does not need another strategy. It needs the decision to begin.

“Exeter does not need another strategy. It needs the decision to begin.”

I hope this Council will choose to make it.

Yours, with the seriousness this moment deserves,

An Exeter resident

This open letter is published for anyone who shares its concerns to read and to draw on when responding to the consultation, which closes on 29 June 2026.

Sources

- All factual claims in this letter are drawn from primary sources. They are summarised below. Full source files are held and can be supplied on request.
- Exeter City Council Cultural Strategy 2026–31 Draft, Baseline Report, and Cultural Strategy Assessment (2026); Executive Report s104543 (April 2026).
- Exeter City Council City Centre Strategy 2026–31 (“Exeter: Our City Centre”), Action Plan, and Executive Report (April 2026).
- The Exeter Plan, Publication Draft (Regulation 19), October 2023 — Policy S2 Liveable Exeter principles, including Principle 7 “Connected Culture”; Policy C1 Cultural and Tourism Facilities; paragraphs 12.5–12.20.
- Exeter City Council committee portal (committees.exeter.gov.uk) — Executive, Council, Scrutiny minutes and reports cited by date and reference number.
- Fourth Street, New Entertainment Venue Advisory Group (NEVAG) Needs Assessment, September 2017 (ECC ref s60616).
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- Exeter City Council Executive minutes 11 August 2015 (MI=4668) — St Sidwell’s Point enhanced Passivhaus scheme approval.
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- The Box Plymouth, The First Five Years: Social & Economic Impact Report, September 2025 (£244m economic footprint; £48m capital; 1.1m visits including 72,000 international).
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- Published 2025–26 programmes of Bristol Beacon (Lily Allen, Suede, Franz Ferdinand, Wet Leg, Kraftwerk, OMD, Mogwai, Happy Mondays, The Stranglers, Sparks; plus the LSO / Rattle / Pappano orchestral season), Plymouth Pavilions / Plymouth Arena (Chase & Status, Olly Murs, Ocean Colour Scene, Kula Shaker, UB40, Billy Bragg, The 1975; comedy — Romesh Ranganathan, Bill Bailey, Alan Carr, Jack Whitehall) and Bristol O2 Academy / SWX — none of which appear on any Exeter listing; Exeter live-music venue capacities (Great Hall 1,700 on-campus; Corn Exchange 500; Exeter Phoenix c.450).
- Bristol City Council Cultural Impact Survey 2023/24, published July 2025 (£892.9 million total impact).
- Turner Contemporary, published impact claims (4 million+ visitors; over £100 million economic impact; 150+ new businesses in the surrounding streets); Local Government Association Margate case study; Canterbury Christ Church University economic impact research.
- Government announcement 14 April 2026 — Arts Everywhere Fund first tranche of £127.8 million.
- Hull UK City of Culture 2017 evaluation (5.3 million cultural visits; £220 million investment).
- Historic England Heritage at Risk Register ArcGIS FeatureServer 2021–2025 (Exeter city-centre additions 2024).
- Centre for Cities 2026 city outlook data (Exeter affordability, wages, disposable incomes).
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- Exeter Observer FOI work on University of Exeter student headcount, 2022–23.
- ECC Members' Interests Register (current); ECC Council Constitution and Scheme of Delegation.
- Devon County Council Local Government Reorganisation timeline (shadow authority elections May 2027; vesting April 2028).