

# Exeter City Centre Strategy, Vision and Action Plan 2025

## Summary of Stakeholder Engagement Workshops



### Introduction

Exeter City Council commissioned LDA Design, supported by Lambert Smith Hampton and City Science, to update the City Centre Vision and Action Plan to ensure that the city centre is fit for the future. Adapting to post-pandemic consumer, transport and commercial trends, the new City Centre Vision and Action Plan will complement existing strategies.

This engagement programme is an opportunity to be an exemplary case of outcomes-led public engagement. This report summarises the engagement activities completed so far for the City Centre Vision and Action Plan and next steps.

Activities were designed to ensure that attendees can make a meaningful contribution to make Exeter a city that works for everyone. The engagement

programme brings the public, businesses and organisations closer to the Council, embodying the collective endeavour that underpins the Vision and Action plan.

On 8th and 9th July 2024 Exeter City Council and LDA Design facilitated four two-hour workshops at Positive Lights. Of the 215 people invited, 60 people were able to attend the workshops. They were asked to identify the key challenges that Exeter faces as a city, solutions for making the city fit for the future, and actions for delivering the strategy. The groups invited included:

- Businesses
- Public sector institutions including local government representatives
- Educational organisations
- Stakeholders
- Cultural and heritage organisations
- Citizens groups
- Community organisations

# Workshop Outcomes

The facilitated workshops consisted of 3 activities. For the future of the city centre, people were asked to consider: 1) issues and challenges, 2) solutions and 3) actions. The responses we received from the participants are summarised under these 3 headings below.

## Workshop Activity One: Issues and Challenges

We first asked the participants to consider what are the issues and challenges Exeter faces. They broke into small discussion groups, then wrote their responses on post it notes and added them to the wall. Reviewing the 219 responses following the workshops, we found they fell under a few key themes: people, activities, transport and movement and environment. Against these themes below, we have identified the key issues and challenges raised by the participants.

### People

- More people need to live in the city centre to make it more vibrant.
- Rent prices are exceptionally high so there is a need for more affordable housing.
- More homes located above city centre shops and units.
- The community needs more of a voice as part of city centre life
- More of a citizen mindset and shared accountability.
- Anti-social behaviour, people feel unsafe especially at night along Sidwell St and the High St.
- With an increase of families in the city there is nowhere kids can go.
- Metrics useful but missing social inequalities.

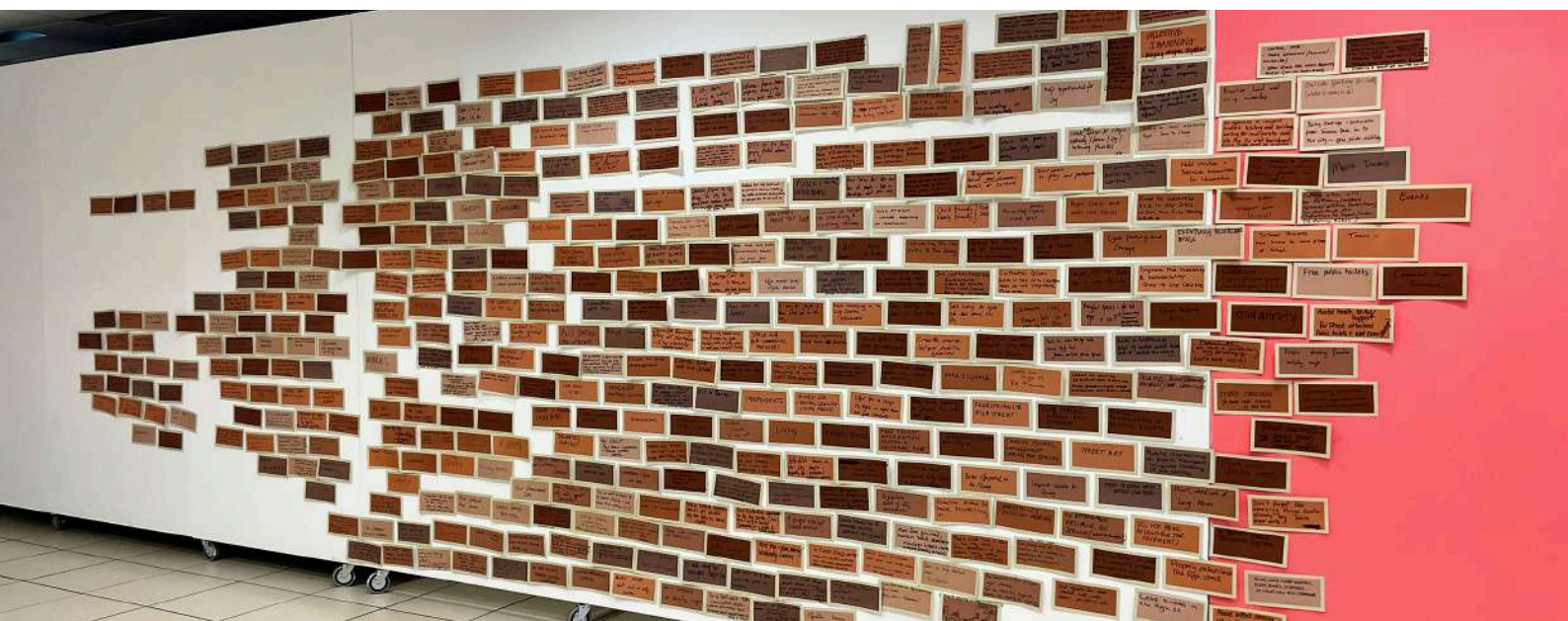
- Lack of support and funding for the homeless.
- How can a safe space be provided for those with addictions.

### Activities

- Need a cultural “vibe” - permanent spaces, varied activities, sense of cultural identity that everyone feels part of.
- Lack of a central tourist and visitor information .
- Need for more activities in the centre such as attractions, events, experiences and an evening offer after 6pm for all ages 18+.
- Skateparks, parkour, basketball courts
- Concern around High Street footfall declining and walkability of streets due to lack of active frontages.
- Underuse and neglect of heritage assets which is an opportunity to use history to make infrastructure changes.
- Huge asset of the City Wall which is not taken advantage of

### Transport and Movement

- Concern that there is too much traffic and poor road infrastructure.
- Disappointment around LTN’s being overturned.
- Wayfinding is needed as it is difficult to find your way around the city.
- Lack of easy connectivity between the Centre, Quay and Stations.
- Poor transport connectivity and cycling is not safe or enjoyable.
- Compact and congested city but still reliance on driving in.
- Western Way divides communities.
- Parking zones and charges need reviewing.



Photographs of the issues and challenges and the wall built at the workshops, July 2024

## Environment

- Importance of planning for trees and green space in the city centre, not just for reasons of amenity and biodiversity, but as a serious way of keeping the centre cool in possibly much hotter summers.
- Need to address issues of pollution within the River Exe.
- Lack of nature inclusivity and connectivity

## Workshop Activity Two: Solutions

With these challenges in mind, participants were asked to consider solutions against a series of questions the facilitators posed. They wrote their solutions on over 400 'cut-out' paper bricks and stuck them on the wall as if bricklaying. The wall created with these bricks was inspired by Exeter's historic walls encasing the city centre and meant as a metaphor for building the foundations for the future of the city. Set out below are the 6 questions we posed and a summary of the responses. The responses we have listed are either strong themes we identified or topics which came up multiple times.

### 1) What makes Exeter a special place?

*'Exeter is ok as a small city in a large rural county. Let's celebrate our unique identity.'*

- The compact size of the city making it easier to know who people are and get around on foot or bicycle.
- It is rural with proximity to sea and moor with the beautiful River Exe and many green spaces such as Northernhay Gardens.
- The vibrant culture which draws people to the museums, theatres, independent shops and night life.

- Roman and Medieval history which is evident in the Roman Walls, Cathedral, Quay and historic streets.
- The University's reputation for innovation and strong presence of the students.

### 2) Which are our priority development sites or buildings to repurpose?

*'How can we support the owners / developers of the Royal Clarence and Debenhams to bring both sites back into use.'*

Key sites mentioned the most included:

- Royal Clarence Hotel and Harlequins.
- Debenhams, with ideas for repurposing.
- The Old Bus Station with ideas for re-use.
- Several car park sites across the city.

Key ideas about how re-development could take place included:

- For repurposing vacant properties set up a task force to take a pro-active approach to engaging property landlords.
- Attract inward investment and facilitate meanwhile uses.
- Keep the density in the city centre and encourage accommodation above shops as well as new well-designed car-free homes.
- Residential apartments in the city centre (1 bed, 2 bed, 3 bed) to build community and a sense of ownership.
- Consider how to meet Net Zero targets such as with a city-wide Heat Network.

### 3) What uses or activities are missing from the City Centre?

*'Outdoor chill out zone for 'youth' a place to sit and listen to music, picnic street food. Performance space, market, skate zone, outside but with power and planting and landscaping.'*

The range of ideas for uses and activities missing included:

- More living in the city centre which is more fine grained, human scale development.
- Space for start-ups for graduates and new businesses, markets (co-op owned), food court, produce and eateries.
- Activities to support and provide family activities: non-alcohol-related after 6pm, play area in one of the parks, play café, indoor themed play, social activities (outside of leisure centre), crafting hubs and drop in activity areas.
- The First Friday event which would be connected to InExeter and the City Council to engage and promote businesses.
- More cultural activities: a new tourist information centre, a community centric, cultural hub (for locals, organisations, research, industry and tourists).
- Nighttime offer for a range of ages not

just students with more entertainment venues.

- Pop up sport events.
- New build should reflect historic character and people friendly streets.

Many comments were about actions needed in order to better understand who the users are and their needs:

- Gather data so businesses are better able to respond to need and aspirations of Exeter's community and visitors.
- Understand who are our visitors, shoppers and commuters, where do they work, what do they want to visit and how much do they want to pay?
- Set up a panel of community and cultural organisations to identify need and opportunities for cultural activities and identify locations in the city where young people dwell or underused.
- Understand pedestrian routes and footfall



Stakeholder Workshop July 2024

to help stimulate civic market with modest rents.

- Be conscious of the links between vibrant uses of space and addressing social issues such as loneliness, safety, anxiety need to made.

#### 4) How can we improve our streets and spaces?

*'More 'joy' infrastructure such as a band stand for events, cleaning the river and canal for swimming, introducing a great range of outdoor events.'*

Some comments focussed on the need to improve biodiversity and connections:

- Improve visibility and accessibility between city centre and Quay and Canal.
- Improve feeling of safety on Sidwell Street.
- Carry out existing re-development plans for Fore Street and South Street.
- Provide more attractive streets with colourful street furniture and public art.
- Provide more practical amenities such as public toilets and a wet room as a safe supervised space.
- Make greener streets and spaces with more trees that work for everyone.
- Re-imagine the city walls which are hidden away as a car free walking route.
- Create biodiversity corridors with bio-carrying capacity through improved wildlife habitats.

Many other comments focussed on how to improve active travel in the city:

- Make the city more sustainable with less cars and more bikes.
- How can we improve pedestrian and cycling access into the city centre.
- Fairer distribution of space between driving, walking, cycling and public transport to discourage car use.

- Provide safer ways to cycle into and around the city and more secure bike parking in suburban city centre areas.
- Create accessible map of cycle network which has mapped out by cycle campaign.

#### 5) Who needs to be involved in delivering the Action Plan?

There was a lot of discussion about governance. People felt that to have effective implementation of the Vision and Action Plan, there needs to be a governance group which is representative.

Suggestions for members of this group included:

- A representative selection of residents to provide local knowledge, include city centre communities and community builders.
- Transport experts including DCC, Combined Authority, ECC, Network Rail, rail operators, buses etc.
- Property Owners in Exeter, Chamber of Commerce, developers and businesses.
- Cultural organisations: RAMM, Phoenix, Library Northcott, Corn Exchange, heritage organisations etc.
- University and student societies.
- Charities and 3rd sector organisations.
- Artists

There were a number of suggestions as to how delivery could be achieved:

- Set up a mechanism for citizen voices to contribute and be heard.
- Exeter could follow Amsterdam's lead through the Doughnut Economics Workshop process to bring to light where we are (fund the DEAL group to do it).
- Set up a group for each key site to overcome blocks to development.

## 6) How will we pay for it?

Participants had a lot of ideas which generally pointed towards entrepreneurial and agile solutions requiring effective and fleet of foot governance to bring different pots of money together. The participants provided the following suggestions for funding which we have not yet researched or interrogated.

- Research examples of successful funding models
- Prioritise small number of investment models and connect citizen voices to this
- Use civic partners to leverage funding for “whole city” solutions
- Business/City endowment scheme (research examples of models)
- Mutual co-op to create development – JV vehicle with social impact investing
- Grants, funds, lottery funding
- Central/local government, Levelling up fund
- % contributions from ECC, DCC, Exeter Uni, Exeter College, RD Hospital, Large businesses (like John Lewis)
- Developers and contributions S106 & CIL
- Private landlords investing in their property, selling residential accommodation in the city centre, more mixed use to combine money generated from social and economy.
- Business Improvement District income
- Other: vacancy taxes, workplace parking levy, tourist tax, private pension funds, crowd funding.

## Workshop Activity Three: Actions

In the final part of the workshop, the participants were asked to pick their priority recommendation and to map out an action plan for delivering this. Their actions recognised the complexity of delivering City Centre improvements and realistically identified appropriate first steps, such as gathering an evidence base, forming a partnership or task force, and mapping priority sites, before any decisions on implementation could be made. This exercise ensured the action plan would include the necessary steps to delivering their small and large-scale solutions. Some of the participants’ examples of actions:

- *An offer for families after 6pm:*
  1. *Speak to users - what do they want?*
  2. *Work with BID and biz to create offer.*
  3. *Trial it and iterate.*
- *Multi-functional family solution:*
  1. *Understand proposal for Debenhams building.*
  2. *Food/entertainment solutions suitable for all ages*
  3. *Get them in!*
- *Improve connectivity for walking and cycling routes in City Centre:*
  1. *Cycle path through Cathedral Green from South St. to High St.*
  2. *Discourage motor traffic on Fore St.*
  3. *Better crossings of Western Way especially City to Quay*

# Next Steps

## Workshops with Councillors

Part of our engagement strategy is to hold the same workshop with the City's Councillors to understand their views of the existing City Centre challenges and how they can be solved within the Action Plan. The Councillors will also provide an insight into the general public's view of how the Vision and Action Plan can improve the City Centre.

## Online Questionnaire

To ensure our engagement programme is inclusive and accessible, we are running an online consultation via the City Council website for 6 weeks. The consultation will roughly follow the same format of the in-person workshop events, however participants can respond to questions through a survey or questionnaire.

Respondents will begin by identifying the key issues and challenges currently in Exeter City Centre, before proposing solutions. This consultation will be publicly accessible and will be sent to schools, colleges and the university to encourage young people to participate. This session will give the general public the opportunity to become involved with the project for the first time.

## Exeter City Centre Strategy, Vision and Action Plan 2025 Document

Exeter City Council acknowledges a number of challenges and issues were raised from those that attended the 4 workshops, as well as ideas and solutions to address them.

Following the engagement programme, the City Council will prepare a draft Exeter City Centre Strategy, Vision and Action Plan, drawing on the findings from the stakeholder consultation and further Members' workshop.

The City Council will take the lead on bringing key stakeholders together to agree and facilitate the Action Plan, maximizing partnership collaboration and the potential for joint funding initiatives where-ever possible.



Stakeholder Workshop July 2024



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