

Exeter City Centre Strategy, Vision and Action Plan 2025

Summary of Councillors' Engagement Workshop



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 undertaken with Councillors for the City Centre Vision and Action Plan and next steps.

On 4th November 2024 Exeter City Council and LDA Design facilitated a 2-hour workshop at the Civic Centre for around 30 Councillors. This followed four stakeholder workshops on 8th and 9th July 2024 at Positive Lights.

Councillors from Exeter City Council, as well as relevant Portfolio Holders and Ward Councillors from Devon County Council were invited to attend the workshop.

Workshop Activity

Participants were asked to consider solutions against a series of 6 questions the facilitators posed. They wrote their solutions on '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 posed and a summary of the responses. The responses highlighted are either strong themes identified or topics which came up multiple times.

1) What makes the City Centre a special place?

'Young, vibrant and lively due to student population (College and University)' and with a 'vibrant mix of uses, such as leisure, cultural, retail etc.'

Many responses about what makes the city centre a special place were about leisure and culture including: creative activities within the city, live music, dancing, leisure opportunities (including the canal and river), living and the city's 'ethos'. Specific venues which Councillors considered special are: RAMM, Phoenix, the Cathedral, library, cinema, Barnfield Theatre, St Sidwell's Point and Corn Exchange.

Other responses focussed on the historical heritage in the city, describing the 'wealth of heritage assets and the beautiful cobbles' and how there are 'many historical buildings mixed in with modern buildings' and 'a mix of history with some fab new features'. Particular buildings were mentioned such as the Roman Wall, Guildhall, Cathedral, Castle, St Nicholas Priory, the underground passages and the variety of building styles.

One participant described the City Centre as 'not too big, not too small and a balance of chain and indie shops'. Others highlighted: high end shops, quirky and independent shops (on Gandy Street, Fore Street and Roman Walk), restaurants, night-time economy, food offer, pubs, 'nice places to go for coffee, meet friends', John Lewis, Custom House and the Quay.

Many described the city as small, compact, traffic free and 'busy but an extremely walkable city which is very time efficient'. Drawing on the natural assets in the city responses included: 'a combination of modern city centre and the Quay and River and Canal', 'the number of lovely green spaces', the public realm, green canopy, areas of clean air and a street trees and planters. Special green spaces mentioned included: Northernhay, Southenhay, Cathedral Green, Rougemont Gardens, Cathedral Green and the riverside.

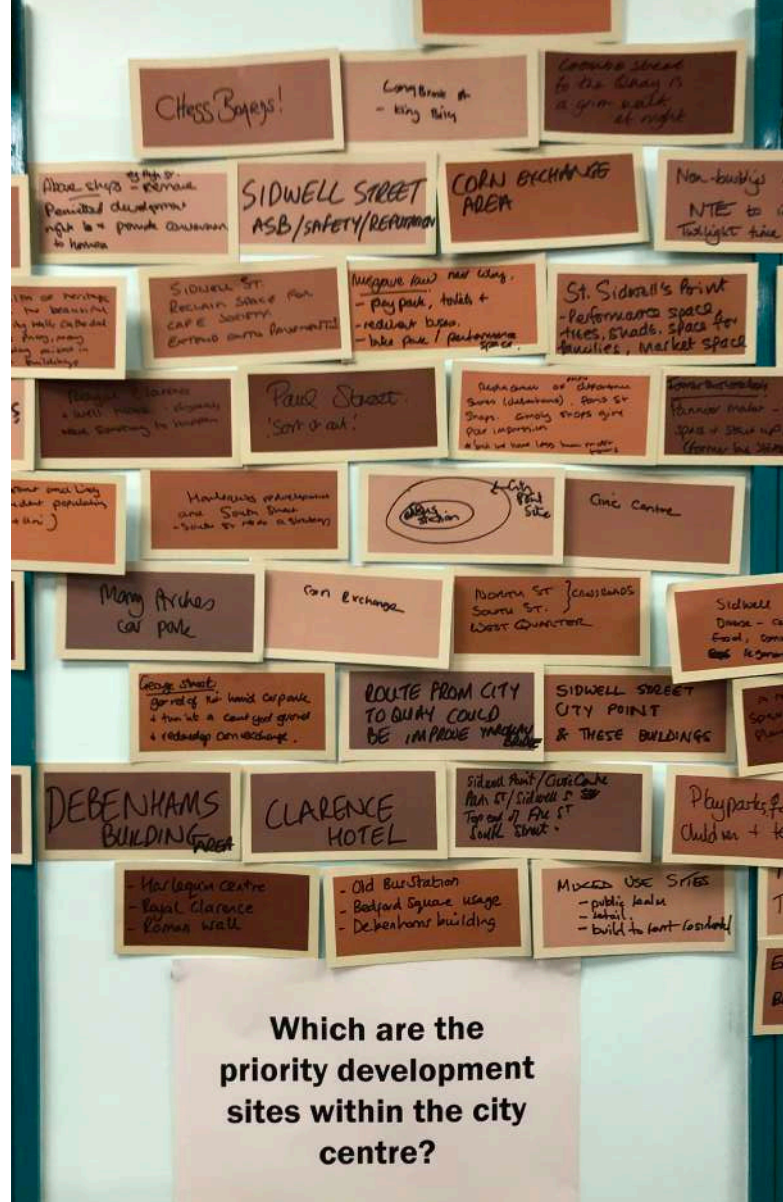
2) Which are the priority development sites within the city centre?

'Replacement of empty department stores (Debenhams), Paris Street shops and empty shops give a poor impression, but we have less than most towns.'

Key development sites the Councillors identified included: Princesshay, Corn Exchange, Mary Arches car park, Harlequins Shopping Centre, Royal Clarence and Well House, Debenhams and the Civic Centre. Many responses mentioned the Old Bus Station and St Sidwell's Point with suggestions for re-use such as: a covered space with a pannier market and start-ups, performance space, trees providing shade and space for families.



What makes the City Centre a special place?



Which are the priority development sites within the city centre?



Photographs of building the wall built at the workshop, November 2024

Their ideas about how re-development could take place included: mixed use sites, public realm, retail, build to rent residential and introducing permitted development rights to promote conversion to homes, for example above shops on the High Street.

Participants identified several key areas of public realm which need improvements:

- Route from City Centre to the Quay could be improved as it is a grim walk at night
- North St, South St crossroads in the West Quarter.
- Sidwell Street has issues of ASB, safety and poor reputation, proposed extending uses onto the pavements with more diverse uses such as café culture, food, community regeneration.
- On George Street, need to re-develop the car park and make the square more attractive.
- Longbrook Street to the King Billy
- Bedford Square usage
- Musgrave Row could have a play park, toilets, redivert buses, bike park and performance space
- Paul Street
- Paris Street

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

'A market place, covered market, pannier market, modern market place, market hall, market stalls on Sidwell Street, pop-up markets, larger farmers market, street theatre and stalls.'

It was different forms of markets that participants suggested most of all. Also frequently mentioned was a concert hall, theatre and entertainment venue with larger capacity, this could be a multi-purpose entertainment space for gigs, plays and comedy.

One participant suggested 'a city centre village community'. Other uses and activities suggested included: small units much needed for micro and pop-up business opportunities, start-ups, small central indie stores, like Cargo City in Bristol. Other suggestions included:

- More café culture, arts and events, and places to have a coffee after 5 pm
- A coordinated approach to recognising and promoting heritage sites across the city for tourists and locals, through the provision of tourist information and promotion of the cultural offer.
- Outdoor theatre venue near the Quay or in a city square.
- Programming of an Exeter Fringe and twilight offering

There were ideas for more sporting facilities open to all including: an ice-skating rink, bowling, family play activities, multi-generational spaces, children's soft play and outdoor playground and chess boards. Others mentioned the need for more green spaces within the City Centre with a decent network of street trees, pocket parks with more trees and sitting spaces, an arboretum on the slopes of Northernhay and better policing patrols to make these places feel safe and pleasant.

There were suggestions for how to improve moving around the city with connected wayfinding to the river, a tram, cycle 'rickshaws', closed zones to traffic and electric car charging for residents who live in the city centre. Cyclists need more bike storage and electric bike hire.

4) How can City Centre streets and spaces be improved?

'Spaces to sit, socialise, eat, drink outside and more trees in the High Street area.'

Comments for how to improve streets and spaces in the City Centre provided helpful suggestions which fell under a number of different topics, listed below. These range from how to improve streets for pedestrians and cyclists, to better programming and communication of uses and activities. For the public realm, ways to liven up the interface between buildings and streets, introduce much needed amenities and better maintenance of streets. A few specific routes to improve were also mentioned.

Active travel

- Streets accessible to all including more pedestrianised areas, traffic calmed streets and walking only routes
- Specific places suggested for pedestrianisation: High Street, Haven Rd (or 20 mph), South St/Fore St/North St

- Car free days
- Return of electric bike scheme
- Better night transport
- Proper places for coaches to drop off and collect that is meaningful

Programming of uses and activities

- Better working with community organisations/arts/culture for meanwhile uses.
- Spaces that support transition to nighttime.
- More places for people in temporary accommodation to go to in the day.
- A tourist tax

Communication about uses and activities

- Better signing and connectivity for places and routes
- Trails and walking and cycling routes
- Public art trail
- QR Codes
- Destination maps
- Map of cycle racks
- Better signage



Councillor's Workshop November 2024

Building frontages interface with public realm:

- Integrated design
- Community public art on walls
- Attractive hoardings for derelict spaces (King Billy)
- Window displays in vacant shops
- For void shops threaten rent auctions
- Opportunities for start-ups reduce rents to also help reduce vacancies
- Restore smaller heritage shops and introduce insulation programme for shop owners and enforcement for landlords
- Precedent of Seven Dials Market, London

Features to include:

- More free places to sit down in bad and hot weather
- Flower hanging baskets, shrub beds, street trees
- Shelter, seating, benches, eating spaces
- Drinking water fountains
- Public toilets

Proper maintenance of:

- Paving and existing trees (Sidwell St. South St.)
- Street trees network to mitigate heat and flooding
- Graffiti and weeds
- Underground waste bins separated for all types of recycling
- Good cleaning

Specific places:

- Make more of a feature of each quarter eg. Fore St. area
- City Wall walk
- City Centre to Quayside walking route
- Improving South St for residents/business

5) Which city businesses and partners should be involved with the delivery of the Action Plan?

Suggestions for who should be involved in the delivery of the Action Plan fell under a number of different sectors as set out below:

Public sector

- Government
- Devon County Council
- ECC
- University of Exeter
- Exeter College
- Police
- Visit Exeter
- Historic England

Private sector

- Stakeholders in Exeter Partnership
- Business, agencies, InExeter, shops large and small
- Professional Services (solicitors etc)
- Chamber of commerce in Exeter
- Pension funds
- Major banks
- Voluntary Sectors
- Tourist businesses in and out of the city, hotels
- Developers
- Landlords of buildings
- New owner of Princesshay
- ATG Theatre Company
- The O2

Community and charities

- Charities eg. Exeter Quay and Canal Trust, St Petroc's, CoLab, Civic Society
- Devon Community Foundation
- NGOs
- Sports teams
- Artwork Exeter
- Community & residents. Including residents to groups around edges of centre

Next Steps

Online Questionnaire

To ensure our engagement programme is inclusive and accessible, we will be running an online consultation open to the whole community via the City Council's website. The consultation will roughly follow the same format of the in-person workshop events, however participants can respond to questions through an online survey.

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 online questionnaire will give the general public and the wider businesses community 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 many ideas and solutions have been proposed to address issues in the City Centre. Following the business, member and wider general public engagement programme and development of the Corporate Plan by the City Council, a draft Exeter City Centre Strategy, Vision and Action Plan will be developed.

The City Council will take the lead on bringing key stakeholders together to agree and facilitate the Action Plan. This will maximize partnership collaboration and the potential for joint funding initiatives wherever possible. The engagement programme has brought together the public, businesses and organisations closer to the Council, embodying the collective endeavour that underpins the Vision and Action Plan.

Transport

- GWR and Network Rail
- Bus company: Stagecoach
- Taxi forum

6) From what has been discussed today, how can it be paid for?

Participants suggested the following existing funding opportunities:

- Government grants such as redevelopment funding
- Council Tax
- Business Improvement District levy (expand/deepen)
- Section 106 and CIL
- Parking charges 24 hours
- Pension funds
- Devon County Council
- University of Exeter
- Housing funding

Participants suggested the following ideas for new types of funding opportunities which we have not yet researched or interrogated:

- Tourist Tax
- Private/Public Partnerships
- Business "Air Miles"
- Restructuring business rates to use locally
- Business Rates for HMOs
- Investment from commercial companies like mobile phone companies to sponsor Ipay for venues and expand 5G network
- Best practice innovative funding (learn from other areas)
- Sponsorship opportunities
- Sale of Civic Centre
- Charge CIL on co living blocks
- Council bonds
- Workplace parking levy to pay for sustainable transport
- New owner of Princesshay, The Fraser Group