EXMOUTH TOWN COUNCIL
Community Engagement Task & Finish Forum (TAFF)

Notes of the meeting held at 4pm on Tuesday 25th November 2025 in the Town Hall Chamber

Present

Nicky Nicholls	NN	ETC Councillor (Chair)
Steve Gazzard	SG	ETC Councillor
Louise Venables	LV	ETC Councillor
Dianne Conduit	DC	ETC Councillor (ex-officio)
Graham Deasy	GD	ETC Councillor (ex-officio)
Lisa Bowman	LB	ETC Town Clerk
Lisa Greenway	LG	ETC notetaker

Apologies - None

1. **Welcome, introduction and apologies**

NN welcomed members and it was noted that no apologies were received.

2. **To approve the notes from the meeting on the 28th of October 2025 and matters arising**

Members were not asked to approve the notes from the 28th of October 2025.

NN provided an overview of what was discussed in the previous meeting.

3. **Stakeholder Mapping – Identify local organisations, voluntary groups, networks and identifiable communities within wards**

LB noted the importance of including a wide range of community groups in engagement mapping, including Churches Together, the Women's Institute, and local sports and hobby groups. It was stressed that these networks could help the council reach people who might not ordinarily engage.

DC highlighted the challenge of engaging residents who are not digitally confident, particularly older people, care home residents and those living in supported accommodation such as McCarthy Stone. Concerns were raised that these individuals may not receive information unless they belong to an organised group.

LV recalled that the Climate Officer had previously run a stall in Exmouth Tesco Superstore and suggested this as a method for reaching a broader audience. Members also identified additional groups such as library users, political party networks, LED members and the Chamber of Trade.

SG explained that organisations such as Talking Newspapers and the Macular Society provide effective routes for reaching people with disabilities. He noted that the Macular Society meets the first Tuesday of every month, which offers him as a member of this organisation a regular engagement opportunity.

DC reminded the group of the many CIC charities in the area, including the Food Bank and the Salvation Army, which are already connected to residents who may be harder to reach.

LB expanded on the council's existing relationships with CICs, supported through grant funding. The possible use of digital engagement platforms was discussed such as Commonplace, but LB emphasised the need for a combination of digital and non-digital approaches. LB reported that the Community Organisations Liaison Panel (COLP) had not been effective due to its formality and the high number of councillors attending. LB and GD now hold monthly informal morning drop-ins with organisations, which have proved far more productive, allowing open discussion without agendas or formal notes. LB provided background on the original purpose of COLP in supporting regeneration-related discussions, noting that it had become less effective over time.

DC suggested that councillor surgeries could help address routine concerns and complaints currently raised on social media, giving residents an opportunity for direct conversations with ward councillors.

NN described a data-collection approach she uses at Sideshore, where a Google Form is completed after each event to record attendance, themes, concerns, demographic details and travel modes. NN proposed adopting a similar system for council activities so that all staff/councillors can record key information consistently. This would allow patterns and trends to be reviewed monthly or quarterly and help inform future work, as well as providing clear evidence to other authorities when residents consistently raise particular issues.

LB raised the issue of complaint handling, explaining that under Quality Council status requirements, all complaints received and responded to must be recorded. It was noted that many complaints received relate to services outside the Town Council's remit, which complicates reporting.

4. To discuss methods of community engagement in Exmouth (existing and desired)

LB said that a key element of community engagement will be guiding residents through the evolving process and helping them understand which scenario is being pursued at each stage. DC emphasised that transparency not only supports clarity but also encourages residents to participate constructively rather than resist changes. DC referenced an upcoming meeting with local primary school heads, intended to help identify new populations that have moved into the town. This could open up ways to reach groups that may not currently engage with the council.

DC noted that most local primary schools also use their own social media accounts and regular newsletters to communicate with parents, and she suggested that engaging children directly on school premises may be more effective, as they are more comfortable in familiar surroundings. LB confirmed that the council's existing methods of communicating with schools includes flyers sent home in book bags and various digital channels that schools share in newsletters.

LB recalled previous success with trailer café pop-ups, where councillors staffed a mobile setup and invited residents to speak informally about their concerns. She suggested that this could be repeated, possibly using the council's branded Tuk-tuk or the Magnolia Centre kiosk. DC highlighted that many families in the area are multilingual; at Beacon school, between 35 and 40 percent of families speak English as a second language. This means engagement methods and materials will need to be inclusive and accessible. She also noted that in her role as deputy mayor, she regularly meets residents at community and youth events and that these

informal encounters provide valuable opportunities to “make every contact count,” strengthening connections with harder-to-reach groups and building trust across the community.

5. Community engagement in the context of Local Government Reorganisation and strategic planning

LB explained that one of the biggest challenges is the risk of residents believing they are being double-taxed. If the council does not increase its precept while simultaneously taking on services that residents assume are already funded through district or county councils, misunderstandings are likely. This makes it difficult to manage expectations, especially because the town council does not yet know which services it will inherit or how much they will cost. LB suggested that the town council might begin introducing some soft, non-specific messaging about “future-proofing” the budget, indicating that extra responsibilities and assets are expected to come down to them over time. However, she stressed that the town council cannot be too prescriptive until it has clarity about what will be transferred and when.

NN pointed out that this early, softer communication actually presents an opportunity to engage residents proactively. By framing the conversation around future responsibilities, the town council can also ask the community what they want the town council to take on and what residents consider fair to pay for. She noted that there is a need for clearer public understanding of which tier of local government is currently responsible for which services.

LB added that the shift from a three-tier to a two-tier system means “middle-tier” services will either be devolved downwards to the town council or moved upwards to the unitary authority. Messaging around this could begin soon, though details depend on which unitary structure is ultimately chosen. The outcome hinges on whether the area falls under a Devon-wide model or comes directly under an Exeter-based model. The latter could be problematic, because Exeter City Council has little experience working with parishes. The earliest the council expects clarity on the chosen unitary scenario is March 2026.

SG updated members on imminent developments, noting that two Extraordinary East Devon meetings—one Cabinet and one Council—were scheduled for the next day. These meetings would consider the 541 model and the newly introduced 541 Plus model, which includes several Plymouth parishes that Plymouth City Council does not wish to retain. He expressed concern that changing the preferred model so late in the process could create confusion, and he personally preferred sticking with the original proposal. Whatever the outcome of those meetings, the decision would be submitted to Westminster the following day, with a final determination from central government expected in July 2026.

6. Agree on next steps

NN emphasised the need for a more proactive approach to engagement, suggesting members decide on 10 action points where the council is currently falling short. She highlighted the importance of developing a forward plan that sets out opportunities throughout the year, particularly physical chances to engage with the community. With the annual budgeting process happening between December and January, NN proposed identifying points in the cycle where targeted engagement could take place. Once the calendar is set, including town council meeting dates, there should be a monthly check of upcoming agenda items to decide how best to engage the community around each topic. NN noted that the current strategy feels

reactive, focusing on reporting after actions have taken place, and stressed the need to shift towards anticipating opportunities instead.

LV supported the idea of forward planning and suggested that having a list of upcoming events would allow councillors to contribute more effectively and added that councillors could assign themselves to events or topics that match their interests, improving coverage and involvement.

7. To discuss if another meeting needs to be organised

Members agreed to hold another meeting in January to allow time to prepare a report for Full Council summarising the number of TAFF meetings held, the approach taken, the outcomes reached, and the recommendations proposed. LB confirmed that if recommendations are agreed at the January meeting, they can be presented to Full Council on the 9th of February 2026. The date will be agreed in due course.

The meeting closed at 17:40