



Transport Planning
A379 Bridge Road Consultation
Devon County Council
County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter EX2 4QD
transportplanning-mailbox@devon.gov.uk

17th July 2026

Dear Sir/Madam,

Response to Public Consultation re. A379 Bridge Road, Exeter: Bridge Replacement Scheme (15th June – 27th July 2026)

The Inland Waterways Association (IWA) and Friends of Exeter Ship Canal & Heritage Harbour (FESCHH) hereby submit a joint response to Devon County Council's consultation on the proposed A379 Bridge Road: Bridge Replacement Scheme.

For clarification, The Exeter Ship Canal, which passes under the A379 bridges, provides a five-mile navigable route between Exeter Canal Basin, in the heart of the city, and the English Channel (via Turf Lock and the Exe Estuary). The city's canal basin and the stretch of canal north of the A379 bridges are well used for recreation, particularly by paddle craft. However, through passage to the city from the estuary is significantly impeded by the A379 bridges due to their exceptionally low air draft (circa 1.2 metres for the swing bridge and 1.45 metres for the bascule bridge). The current bridges are moveable to allow boat passage, but because advance notice is required for them to be opened by Devon County Council most waterborne craft currently are deterred.

The IWA and FESCHH (Appendix A) are longstanding stakeholders in the Bridge Replacement Scheme and we have serious concerns regarding:

- The way DCC's lack of vision for the Bridge Replacement Scheme could significantly disadvantage Exeter and Devon for decades to come.
- The content of the consultation and linked material, together with inadequate stakeholder engagement in advance of the consultation.

This letter provides our response to the public consultation under the following headings:

- A) LACK OF VISION
- B) UNREPRESENTATIVE CONSULTATION
- C) CONCLUSION

A) LACK OF VISION

The proposed replacement bridges are expected to remain in place for at least 60 years. If DCC does not grasp the opportunity now to upgrade the bridges with significantly higher air drafts, the opportunities that the canal can offer to the area's community, economy and environment will be lost. Further details are given below, but these can be summarised as:

1. Increasing active travel opportunities and safety.
2. Enabling sustainable freight use of the canal.
3. Increasing business and employment opportunities.
4. Reducing pollution and improving the environment - contributing to net zero by 2050.

Opportunities and benefits of increased bridge clearance

1. Increasing active travel opportunities and safety

Currently, the A379 severs the route for cyclists and pedestrians who use the canalside paths (National Cycle Routes 2 and 34), causing them to divert from the path up to a very busy traffic light controlled crossing. This crosses a four-lane dual carriageway carrying approximately 37,000 vehicles each weekday. There have been safety incidents at this crossing, as stated in DCC's Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) for the Scheme.

We note that the SOBC, which has been approved by the Department for Transport, explicitly identified the potential for cyclists and pedestrians to pass underneath the bridges if they were built higher. This significant safety benefit would be lost if they are replaced at the current height. The Department for Transport's LTN 1/20 recommends an air draft of 2.4m for cyclists at such bridges.

The consultation suggests there are concerns from Active Travel England regarding underpasses. However, our discussions with local cyclists, including Exeter Cycling Campaign, indicate strong support for allowing cyclists and pedestrians to travel directly beneath the bridges rather than crossing the carriageway. The proposed underpasses would be relatively short and comparable to numerous existing cycle routes beneath roads, railways and bridges elsewhere in the country.

If the finalised design for a cycle and pedestrian path requires the canal towpath to be lowered there are examples around the country that show this is perfectly possible. See Appendix B.

2. Enabling sustainable freight use of the canal

At a time when towns and cities throughout the country are introducing congestion management measures and seeking low-carbon transport alternatives, it would be short-sighted to rebuild the A379 bridges at a height that discourages future freight opportunities on the canal. Exeter possesses a vital strategic asset in this regard, with its navigable ship canal.

Waterborne freight increasingly is recognised as delivering environmental, economic and community benefits through:

- reduced HGV traffic, improving urban air quality and the health and wellbeing of residents
- lower carbon emissions and fuel use - barges can carry far more than an HGV, and electric propulsion is a viable option to power barges
- reduced pressure on congested road networks

- support for sustainable last-mile delivery solutions.

One recent, highly relevant example of freight barges offering last-mile deliveries involved a building site adjoining the Regent's Canal in London. Rather than offloading vehicles on the roadside at the site they switched to water transport to deliver materials (and remove site waste) from a nearby consolidation centre. See Appendix C.

Exeter's proposed housing developments alongside the canal at Water Lane and Haven Banks could follow suit, with waterborne deliveries to site, taking the associated HGV and delivery vehicles off the road, preventing further congestion in the city.

IWA's freight advisory panel advocates for a target air draft of approximately 3.0 metres, which would allow many of today's commercial barges to pass unimpeded below the bridges, rather than delaying their time-critical deliveries while waiting for the bridges to be opened. However, a lower air draft may be achievable for freight craft in certain circumstances. We are currently investigating this with a view to reporting our findings to the Bridge Replacement Scheme team.

Electric freight barges operating on Exeter Ship Canal could provide exactly the type of green transport solution that national and local transport policy seeks to encourage. The Bridge Replacement Scheme should therefore facilitate, rather than permanently constrain, future freight possibilities.

3. Increasing business and employment opportunities

Raising the air draft of the A379 bridges would lead to increased use of the Exeter Ship Canal in many ways that can bring additional business to the city. For example:

- Encouraging more visitors to the canal basin, riverside quay and city would boost spend in local businesses
- Creating the potential for new and existing businesses, including boat restoration and moorings in the basin
- Enabling a sustainable, waterborne public transport service from the city to ferry connections at Topsham and Turf, also to coastal towns
- Year-round passenger boat trips to various stopping points and leisure activities such as bird watching excursions to the RSPB reserve at Topsham.

This vision aligns with that of Exeter Heritage Harbour. Exeter is designated as a Heritage Harbour under the national scheme jointly operated by National Historic Ships UK, Historic England and the Maritime Heritage Trust. Its Heritage Harbour Group comprises Exeter City Council, Exeter Canal & Quay Trust and FESCHH.

If DCC progresses with Option 2, i.e. replicating the current low bridge height, there will be detrimental effects to the economy. As the SOBC highlights in point 1.4.2: *"...when the bridges are opened to allow vessels to travel along the canal, there is extensive disruption on the local road network, with associated social and economic impacts."* Whereas if Option 4 is progressed, with a bridge height enabling passage of many craft without opening the bridges, there would be economic gains as vehicle journey times would be quicker.

4. Reducing pollution, improving the environment – contributing to net zero by 2050

One of the Department for Transport's objectives is to achieve a net zero transport sector by 2050. The long term environmental benefits of raising the bridges' height have been highlighted in various points above. However, to summarise:

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- Closing the traffic light controlled crossing (a stated ambition of DCC) would eliminate up to 1,000 crossings of the A379 each weekday, leading to a reduction in pollution as vehicles would no longer stop and restart, or idle, at the lights.
- Introducing waterborne freight use of the canal, particularly electric barges, would achieve green transport solutions for the city.
- Encouraging more active travel along the canalside paths for commuting as well as leisure would reduce vehicle journeys.
- Encouraging more public transport through the introduction of regular ferries along the canal to stop off points at, for example, Marsh Barton Station and Topsham.

We acknowledge that the environmental impacts of raising the bridge height above the proposed Option 2 level would be greater during the construction phase, due to the need to build bigger embankments across the surrounding land. However, these impacts would be relatively short term compared to achieving the long term environmental improvements listed above.

B) UNREPRESENTATIVE CONSULTATION

Considering all users

The consultation introduction states that: *“These improvements aim to improve reliability, safety and connectivity for all users, while supporting access to Exeter and the surrounding area.”* However, we believe that all users have not been fully considered - both current and potential future users of the canal. Nor has access to Exeter and the surrounding area been fully considered if improving navigation along the canal has not been taken into account (see *Improving navigation* below).

Consulting on the Options

Although the Scheme is entitled a Bridge Replacement Scheme, the consultation contains little information about the bridge replacement options. Instead, it focuses almost entirely on walking, cycling and public transport measures along the A379 corridor – with little mention even of those same activities along the canal and its towpaths.

Most significantly, the consultation fails to provide a balanced assessment of Option 4, despite it remaining a valid option during discussions with stakeholders as recently as May this year. Option 4 presented the opportunity to raise the road level of the canal bridges, initially by 0.7 metres and potentially higher if additional funding could be secured. We advised that additional bridge height (and thus air draft below the bridges) would provide a significantly better outcome for the community (see *Opportunities and benefits of increased bridge clearance* above); we suggested a target of 3.0 metres and offered suggestions for sourcing additional funding (see *Lack of engagement* below).

The consultation documentation does not properly explain how Option 4 would operate, nor does it assess its potential benefits in a fair and objective manner. Instead, it focuses almost exclusively on reasons for discounting the option, many of which are unsupported by evidence and contradict feedback we have received from local people and groups. Our engagement with key interested parties and elected representatives has revealed substantial support for the air draft below the new bridges to be increased to enable craft, cyclists and pedestrians to pass under them.

For example, Exeter MP Steve Race said: “I’m disappointed that Devon County Council has decided to consult on only one option, which represents a lack of ambition for Exeter. DCC should consult on options that would increase the air draft, which would provide the most exciting opportunities for future active travel and economic development.”

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It is our view that a consultation cannot be considered representative if it effectively removes from consideration an option that has demonstrated significant public support without presenting the full case both for and against it. Indeed, the consultation simply puts forward a single option from the original five, i.e. Option 2: replacing the bridges at existing road level.

Improving navigation

One of the aims outlined in the consultation's Scheme Overview is to: "*Support the efficient movement of vessels on the canal for leisure and ferry traffic.*" We do not believe that the proposed Scheme assists with this in any way.

If the new bridges are built with a similar height as the current bascule bridge, this will effectively impede free movement along the canal for all but canoes. As at present, boaters would have to submit an advance request for the bridges to be opened. How can this be efficient movement of vessels, even if, as has been suggested, the time taken for physically opening the new bridges may be a little shorter than at present?

Whilst leisure and ferry traffic are mentioned in the consultation, freight craft are not even considered. We believe this is a significant oversight as there is growing awareness nationally of the part that waterborne freight can play in net zero targets such as reducing traffic congestion and pollution (see *Enabling sustainable freight use of the canal* above).

We note that the 1829 public right of navigation on the Exeter Ship Canal, which is still in force today, states: "*It shall be lawful for all persons, with such ships, vessels, barges, boats, craft, and all goods waterborne...to pass at all times...*" (our underlining).

Questionable due diligence

In November 2021, in its SOBC to the Department for Transport, DCC proposed replacing the bridges with new, higher level ones. In October 2025, it published five options for the bridges; one was simply to refurbish the existing ones and four were for new bridges. Of those four, two included raising the road height to varying degrees (Options 3 and 4).

We question whether due diligence was lacking before both the SOBC proposal and the publication of the five options. In particular, why publish two options for increased road height if, as later stated, the:

- Necessary approach gradients would not meet current highway design and road safety standards?
- Engineering constraints would increase both the complexity and cost of the scheme to unacceptable levels?
- Necessary planning and environmental consents would be more challenging?
- Landowners had not been approached about willingness to sell the necessary sections of land for the embankments (we understand part of the land is owned by Exeter City Council).

There was a four-year period between these two stages in the process. Surely this was sufficient time to check such points before publishing the options?

Lack of engagement

We are concerned about the poor stakeholder engagement linked to the Bridge Replacement Scheme. There was no follow up to the stakeholder meeting in October 2025, and our correspondence has rarely been responded to. Additionally, in May 2026, we were informed that a

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meeting would be arranged with ourselves, the Harbour Master and others for the end of June/early July but to date nothing has been forthcoming on this.

In particular, if the perceived decision not to progress with Option 4 is cost-led, we wish to point out that we put forward a funding paper at our meeting with Devon County Council representatives on 14th April 2026. This paper identified several potential funding sources that could contribute towards raising the bridges beyond the proposed level. Despite subsequent correspondence on 24th April 2026 and a later telephone call, we have received no response to the funding paper.

Given the significance of the Scheme and the long-term implications of the decisions being taken, we are extremely concerned that opportunities to explore alternative funding solutions have not been pursued more actively.

C) CONCLUSION

The Scheme proposes expenditure of up to £50million of public money on replacing the canal bridges and associated works. If this investment is to serve Exeter and Devon for the next 60+ years, it should deliver lasting benefits to all transport users rather than merely reproducing existing constraints. We should be building for the future, not the past.

Therefore, we urge Devon County Council to:

1. Reconsider the dismissal of Option 4, including undertaking and publishing a comprehensive assessment of the benefits of increasing the air draft beneath the replacement bridges to enable craft with an air draft up to 3.0 metres to pass under the new bridges.
2. Explore supplementary funding opportunities to maximise bridge clearance.
3. Ensure that cyclists and pedestrians can pass safely beneath the bridges.
4. Future-proof Exeter Ship Canal for leisure, freight and passenger use over the next 60+ years.

The replacement of the A379 canal bridges represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to enhance Exeter's transport network, improve active travel and the environment, support economic growth and secure the long-term future of one of the city's most important assets. That opportunity should not be missed.

Yours faithfully,

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Phil Bialyk, Ruth Williams, Grahame Forshaw (Exeter City Council);

Steve Race MP

APPENDICES

Appendix A

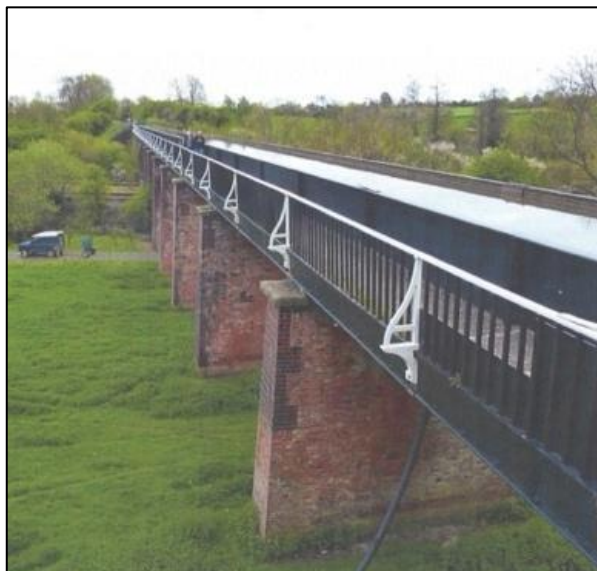
The Inland Waterways Association (IWA) is the only independent, national charity campaigning for Britain's canals and rivers. We are dedicated to supporting and regenerating Britain's waterways – for leisure, living and business. We lobby Parliament, champion the waterways and support waterways restoration.

The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal & Heritage Harbour (FESCHH) is a voluntary group, recently registered as a Charity (CIO), dedicated to breathing new life into the heritage and use of the canal and basin as an integral part of the City's life and economy and for the enjoyment of everyone today and in the future.

Appendix B

Examples of lowered towpaths.

1. Edstone Aqueduct on the Stratford-upon-Avon canal, built in 1816, uses a cast iron trough design. Pedestrians and cyclists use the towpath to the left of the water channel.

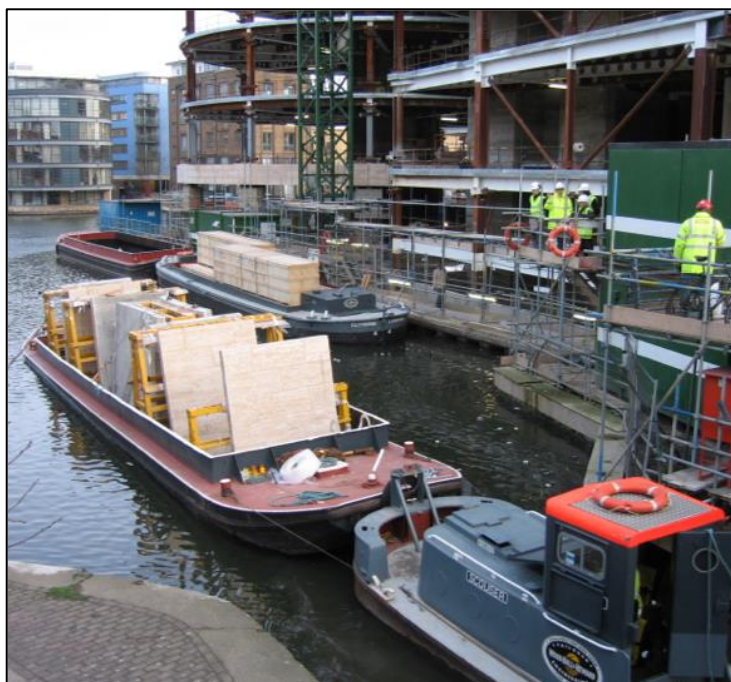


2. The new Carreghofa Lane bridge on the Montgomery Canal will feature a towpath lower than the water level. The Montgomery Canal is currently being restored. This bridge has been prefabricated in concrete, with a concrete barrier dividing the water from the towpath. Photo shows the water channel profile (left) and towpath profile (right).

Photo: Mike Haig.



Appendix C



DELIVERIES TO WATERSIDE BUILDING SITE ON REGENT'S CANAL

- Issues with planning permission for offloading vehicles on road at site due to availability of waterside access
- Nearby vacant site used as a consolidation centre – with barges used to deliver and take away materials from site.

• *Photo courtesy of Roger Alsop*

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