

**Exeter City Council Survey – Parks & Greenspace Strategy**  
**Background information for the Devon Countryside Access Forum**  
(Extracts from Exeter City Council documents)

**January 2021**

<https://exeter.gov.uk/parkspolicy/>

### **The Reason for a Parks and Greenspace strategy**

Exeter City Council is seeking to update its 2005 Parks and Open Spaces Strategy and will consider the following matters:

- provision, management and maintenance issues when budgets are decreasing
- look at provision matching need, especially in relation to Active and Healthy lifestyles
- link greenspaces to improve cycle and footpath networks and green corridors
- look at future demand and need in the light of population increase and housing needs
- investigate the potential for transfers of land to communities

The population of Exeter in 2018 was 130,400 with more housing planned in the next ten years. This puts pressure on greenspaces for physical and recreational activity. Such spaces offer health benefits.

The Council has 246 hectares of green space and this includes parks, playing fields, allotments, woodlands and informal green space such as pocket parks. In addition, the city's valley parks, managed by the Devon Wildlife Trust, account for a further 144 hectares. The Environment Agency, University and Forestry Commission have other land available for public access.

### **Overview**

There are good levels of provision and distribution, with most people living within a 10-minute walk of a formal or informal green space. There is scope to join up smaller green spaces to form larger green corridors with active recreation and habitat benefits.

Fields in Trust (formerly the National Playing Fields Association) suggests 0.8 Ha of formal (parks and gardens) open space for every 1000 head of population. In Exeter there is 0.26 Ha of formal greenspace, but 0.85 Ha per 1000 when formal and informal green space are counted together.

However there remain the problems of increasing costs, and reductions in budgets. Cost-saving measures over the past ten years has reduced opportunities to find further savings. This leaves limited options to safely maintain the land and assets the council holds.

There are considerable opportunities for communities to be more involved in their local green spaces, for example by taking on minor works and improvements to such spaces.

The distribution of greenspace may appear comprehensive and evenly spread, but work remains to obtain a more realistic assessment of the actual and potential value to the community, and the city as a whole.

The Strategy is being informed by the Exeter Corporate Plan; Greater Exeter Strategic Partnership (still being developed); Liveable Exeter; National Planning Policy Framework; Planning and Local Development Framework (Exeter Local Plan); Physical Activity Strategy 2019; Play Strategy 2020; Playing Pitch Strategy 2020 and Trees and Woodlands Strategy 2020; Exeter and East Devon Green Infrastructure Strategy 2009; and Towards Carbon Neutral Exeter Report July 2019;

### **Themes for the strategy**

These are:

- Ensuring planning policy provides, protects and enhances green space.
- Promoting Active Design principles. This is where the development of built areas takes into account green space to support and encourage active lifestyles.
- Ensuring that Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) receipts are used to support parks and greenspace.
- Making sure the development and evolution of parks and greenspace meets the needs of everyone.
- Assess the value of parks and greenspace across the city.
- Working with other landowners as partners to make the most of green spaces.
- Take a carbon neutral approach.

### **Listing of the key green spaces**

#### ***Formal Parks and Gardens***

Belle Isle Park, Belmont Pleasure Ground, Bull Meadow Park, Bury Meadow Park, Heavitree Pleasure Ground, Northernhay Gardens, Pincus Gardens Pleasure Ground, Rougemont Gardens, Southernhay Greens, St Bartholomew's Cemetery, St Thomas Pleasure Ground, Summerway Park, Topsham Recreation Ground.

### ***Informal Local Greenspace***

These are many and varied. Examples include; Trews Weir Pocket Park, Mary Arches Pocket Park, The Mint, Topsham Pleasure Ground, Merrivale Rd Park, Digby Open Space, Vaughan Road Open Space, Dunsford Gardens, Lakeside, Haven Banks, Sandford Walk.

### ***Natural and semi natural urban greenspaces***

Valley parks, urban woodlands Higher, Exwick and Topsham cemeteries, and 7 closed churchyards

### ***Valley Parks***

The term 'Valley Parks' denotes a local planning designation covering 782ha of space in and around Exeter. Of this larger area, around 140ha of land in the Exe Valley is owned by ECC and comprises the informal public greenspaces which are managed by Devon Wildlife Trust. These are generally and collectively known as the Valley Parks. The parks (in order of approximate area size) include the following.

- Ludwell Valley Park (58ha)
- Riverside Valley Park (43ha)
- Mincinglake Valley Park (19ha)
- Barley Valley Park (Local Nature Reserve, 11ha)
- Belvidere Meadows Valley Park (Local Nature Reserve) and Duryard Valley Park (11ha)
- Whitycombe Valley Park (2ha)

In addition, there are allotments; children and young people's play space; and active sports space.

The strategy does not include highway verges; public rights of way; community gardens; Site of Importance for Nature Conservation in private ownership; churchyards; crematorium, grazing land, school grounds and university and college sports space.

## **Green Space Vision for Exeter**

Exeter will have high quality, green spaces that are safe, attractive, inclusive and accessible for all, supporting habitats, enabling active and healthy lifestyles and promoting the wellbeing of our communities.

## **Green space mapping**

Green space has been mapped and includes:

- NM1. existing information, showing what the council owns and maintains and how it is maintained and inspected.

- NM2. privately owned greenspace. These areas are generally informal greenspace.
- NM3. catchment areas for each green space over 500m<sup>2</sup>, a ten-minute walking distance. The City is well served with few gaps in provision.
- NM4. the consultation in spring 2019. This identified key priorities: commit to maintaining and protecting green spaces; develop a clear policy on Community Asset Transfer; align with Exeter's health and well-being strategies; make biodiversity a key theme; commit to making parks and green spaces accessible to all with positive signage; and engage communities with their local green space.
- NM5. the quality, condition and standards of greenspace. This includes inspection and maintenance regimes, proportionate to the place.
- NM6. the local context, value, and accessibility of each area, and its relevance to the nearest LSOA (area of deprivation)
- NM7. GIS mapping of barriers such as main roads, and the proximity of schools to parks

### **Accessibility**

- There is good distribution of publicly accessible green space across the city. Exceptions include Sowton and Marsh Barton, agricultural areas and the Valley Parks, and the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital.
- Work remains to be done to identify additional potential green space and green corridor links.
- An accessibility audit of each of the principal parks is needed.
- Some Lower Super Output Areas of deprivation in the city are amongst the most deprived in the country. Although there is generally good accessibility, other factors may adversely affect opportunities for recreation and physical activity.
- There are in addition 467 individual sites of "Doorstep" greenspaces over 500 m<sup>2</sup>

### **How is the community going to be engaged?**

Many tasks and skills will always be too complicated, risky or difficult for private individuals and community groups. The responsibilities and liabilities can be onerous. However, there will be many instances where there is no need for the council to be the only method of service delivery. Changes to the land use, forms of maintenance or need for equipment can be made. A partnership arrangement with others can also deliver a different outcome in a range of different ways. The traditional approaches to public greenspace management and maintenance can be challenged and changed and this can have enormous benefit. Such changes will not be easy and it is important that communities are supported to achieve this.

### **Delivering the strategy**

A series of Action Points have been developed. These are designed to deliver the Aims and are grouped by their Outcomes.

## What is the Council doing next?

Subject to consultation, and adoption of the strategy, action points will be developed into detailed rolling work plans to achieve these key points:

- Ensure that key gaps in provision of quality green space across the city are rectified as soon as possible. This will enable full engagement with other strategies and initiatives, such as the Tree and Woodland Strategy, Play Strategy and Playing Pitch Strategy.
- Efficient and effective use of budgets and staff resources requires coherent work programmes and performance measurement, linked to existing data management systems.
- Strategic investment in basic service improvements, (such as developing and implementing a seating and litter bin programme, which gives an immediate visual uplift to a park, and often reduces maintenance costs).
- Develop and actively manage a five-year development and improvement funding plan driven by gaps in provision. This must be linked to proportionate infrastructure repairs and maintenance to reduce expensive reactive work.
- Develop skills and function-specific teams to engender pride and responsibility in the work, and increase professionalism, efficiency and standards.
- Employ skilled, trained and experienced staff to remedy the shortfall in skills, staffing levels and capability management, maintenance, inspection, safety, and systems implementation.
- Review traditional maintenance and delivery channels. Look at other specialist methods of landscape management, for example using Devon Wildlife Trust's expertise in habitat enhancement.
- People and community - boosting participation and increasing use will provide more leverage for funding. LSOAs will be prioritised.
- Develop an evaluation and review system - this will link to the asset management software.

The situation in 2020 is that the costs of maintaining the green space the council owns continues to increase, from an artificially low base, driven by staff, equipment and safety costs. Available funding continues to decrease. There remains some capacity for cost reductions by lowering standards, and/or removing some aspects of high-cost maintenance completely.

It is clear that a more radical approach is required to managing green spaces to achieve the key objectives of the council, against a background of continued and further budget reductions, and a need to find alternative funding.

## Survey Questions

**AIMS** The draft policy sets out eight aims. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each of these aims.

AIM	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
A. Provide, develop and maintain safe, sustainable, equitable and inclusive greenspaces across the city for all who live and work in Exeter					
B. Plan for long term investment in green spaces					
C. Set standards to promote high quality, well maintained greenspaces with a focus on health and wellbeing					
D. Enable community participation and support to sustain, develop and enhance greenspace					
E. Work with other greenspace landowners to maximise the availability of greenspace for recreational purposes					
F. Protect green space from development and seek additional public greenspace to make up shortfalls in provision					
G. Build on existing city greenspace measures to channel, develop and enhance biodiversity and climate change mitigation					
H. Provide a network of greenspaces to safely link communities, habitats, and aid active travel with green corridors					

**Please advise what, if anything, you would change or add to these aims.**

**The draft strategy proposes numerous actions. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with these.**

**ACTIONS** The themes cover the areas of balanced provision; investment; management; quality; communities; partners; protection and planning; biodiversity; and staff and training.

ACTION	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Create and protect rich and diverse habitats and species and protect threatened species					
2. Improve biodiversity through carbon neutral approaches and reducing chemical use					
3. Use green corridors e.g. canal and riverside routes and off-road cycle/walkways to link and improve green space, communities and habitats					
4. Balance grass, herbaceous and shrub species to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change					
5. Work with communities to identify the potential to improve green space use and inclusivity					
6. Encourage volunteering, education and outreach activities					
7. Acquire additional income through e.g. landscape sponsorship, seasonal catering options and, park furniture sponsorship.					
8. Invest Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) receipts in parks and green space					
9. Investigate options for transfer of some or all of the city parks and green space to a trust or similar body					
10. Invest in basic, high impact service improvements e.g. a seating programme					

11. Protect and promote the horticultural heritage of Exeter (Luccombe, Pince, Veitch) by enhancing the formal parks and maintaining them to a high standard					
12. Use Active Design principles and intelligent design to reduce levels of anti-social behaviour across green space					
13. Work with landowners and partners e.g. Devon Wildlife Trust to increase access to green space for recreation and exercise					
14. Through the planning process, enhance green space, protect green space from development and ensure new houses have adequate green space					
15. Enhance staff skills, focusing on horticultural training and parks management					
16. Use technology to improve the management and maintenance of parks and green space					

**Please advise what, if anything, you would change or add to these actions?**

**Please provide any other comments or suggestions about parks and green spaces in Exeter?**