

**Exeter City Council**  
**Play Areas consultation report**



Report from **RedQuadrant**

**May 2019**

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## **1. Introduction**

RedQuadrant were commissioned to carry out a consultative exercise with Exeter residents on Exeter's Community Play Areas in order to:

- Get people's views on draft proposals for how play areas can be developed across the city in future to help Exeter become the most physically active city in England
- Hear people's views on how play areas can be managed effectively as inclusive, safe and accessible places for children, young people and families
- Communicate the Council's expressed need for an integrated and sustainable strategy for the future of built sports facilities, playing fields, pitches, play areas, parks and open spaces
- Explain how people can have their say on the draft Move More Strategy and draft Built Facilities Report.

In parallel to our consultation, the council was also consulting on the overall Physical Activity Strategy, including some specific questions on play areas. We have incorporated some of the findings of the survey into this report.

## **2. Background to the consultation**

The Council is committed to ensuring its community play areas contribute to building a culture of families being active together and support children to lead happy, healthy lives. Play area numbers have doubled in the last thirty years but too many of them are small, basic, and only suitable for a narrow age range. There are not enough larger, more involving and challenging, play areas that cover a wider age range.

The distribution of play facilities is not even across the city as a result of past growth having been largely development led, rather than needs led. Increased repair and maintenance costs are unsustainable in the context of Council budget pressures.

A strategic review undertaken in 2017 proposed a new model for the City, based on national play categories used in Planning Guidance. It is proposed that play areas will be assessed on how close they are to local communities and other play areas; value of the play equipment; and lifespan of the equipment and the age groups

The Priority Actions for the council are:

- Use an evidence led approach to ensure that Local Play Area policy and Community Infrastructure Levy receipts meet people's long-term needs
- Protect and enhance the overall supply of community play areas by promoting Active Design principles

- Invest in sustainable equipment with long life spans based on local community need
- Ensure an equitable distribution across the city with close alignment to the Move More strategy using land that is, where possible, already owned by the Council and is a suitable size for developing flagship play areas.

Initial proposals are:

- To create three strategically located Destination Play Parks close to communities identified as having the greatest health needs. These would be at Arena Park in Pinhoe, Wonford Playing Area in Priory, and at a yet to be determined site in the Exwick/Cowick area
- To revitalise and/or upgrade eight local play areas (based on an analysis of local need) to strategic play area status. These would be the play areas at Cemetery Field, Cowick Barton, Exwick Station Road, George's Close, Pendragon Road, Pinhoe Station Road, Powlesland Road, and Wyvern Park
- To rationalise existing provision by considering not renewing play equipment in up to sixteen lower quality or older play areas, as identified in the Play Area report: Alperton, Greenway, King George V, Lloyd's Crescent, Tappers Close, Addison Close, Burrator Drive, Gloucester Road, Knights Crescent, Monkerton, Mulberry Close, Fleming Way, Lancelot Road, Haccombe Close, Gras Lawn, and Hylton Gardens.

### 3. The consultation

We held two, day long, drop-in sessions at two different locations:

- The ISCA Centre at Arena Park
- St Thomas Pleasure Ground

Exeter officers publicised the two sessions and the wider consultation programme via a range of media, including an intensified social media campaign in the two weeks running up to the sessions

Display boards were produced to communicate the headline points.

Below are the key points from the discussions we had with people visiting the drop-in sessions. Over the two days, we spoke to about 50 people.

#### Day 1 ISCA Centre

*Whipton Barton school group with head teacher*

They take a different approach to play at the school. They use recycled material and the children use their imagination. People have donated, teachers bring things in. Comments from pupils and head:

- Trolleys from Screwfix and wheelbarrows for pushing each other around

- Suitcases to get inside and be carried around, or for playing with dolls
- Foam poles for play battles
- Crutches to pretend you've got a broken leg
- Big red stilts for walking around in
- School also has an adventure playground, where kids practise parkour
- Trees that can be climbed
- A huge sandpit, very popular
- A pebble beach
- A 'mud kitchen' digging area with spades

Recommends Two Moors at Tiverton as a good example of creative and innovative play.

The head is keen to open up the school out of hours and in the holidays for children to play. This could be potentially managed as a community project.

Asked the children where they play outside of school:

- A mini play area with swings
- Some of the parks have scary big kids, so we don't go
- I've got climbing ropes on trees outside my house
- Heavitree park is great

Asked children what they would like to see in their local parks:

- Spaces to play football and basketball
- Trampolines in the floor
- Climbing bars
- Obstacle courses

Conversations with individuals:

*Woman with two boys, one of them is autistic*

Hard to know where to go for play, goes to the less used play parks as her son can't cope with crowds. Mostly King George. There is an all abilities park off Topsham road that was fundraised by someone.

She is also a Community Psychiatric Nurse and sees the importance of local play areas, particularly for low income families. The people who need these parks aren't involved or engaged in community activity.

*Woman with children*

After the Belmont Park consultation, the swings were removed, even though they were identified as a priority.

Asked what she thought of the destination parks. Replied that people need a park you can walk to.

Not replacing equipment is a bit desperate.

Anxiety that small green spaces would be sold off.

Likes the idea of school play areas opening up out of school hours.

Separation from dog walkers is needed

Make parks less secluded so people can't gather for drinking, drug taking

The issue of closed public toilets is very serious

*Man passing by*

Commented on the need for plain English in consultation documents and pointed out a lot of jargon in them.

## **Day 2 St Thomas Pleasure Ground**

Conversations with individuals

*Mother of two boys*

Concerns about destination parks and the high cost of public transport in Exeter

Those families who are less well off don't have the time or money to travel and will therefore be isolated and left out. People with social anxiety or special needs (her son has autism and needs quieter spaces to play)

Gets the impression that the council is focused on flashy stuff: swimming pools, eating places etc and neglecting the outer lying areas.

*Kate Wilder, chair of Park Life*

Heavitree Park Life has raised a lot of funding and is keen to work in partnership with the Council going forward. They would like to look at play equipment and plan with ECC.

The community working closely with the Council, depends upon the motivation of local people. In Heavitree we are motivated. Our success has been due to the relationships we have built. E.g. the 'couch to 5k' has come about because we have engaged people.

We have activities every day at Heavitree Park.

Housing development is a sore point. There's been a huge amount of building and people are protective of green space.

*Two women who use Cowick Barton Fields regularly*

It's important that Cowick Barton Fields is upgraded - so we're not fully behind the strategy for community play areas. We need more seats for older people. We have been told several times in the past that we would be getting more seats but it's never happened. Last time, the money for our seats was used to put seating around the trees in the middle of town.

We'd be more than happy to get involved. We could get a group together and organise jumble sales and tea parties for the local community.

Please contact us to discuss how we can work together: RedQuadrant have given her number to the local Community Builder, who will contact her.

*Woman from Exwick*

Burrator Drive in Exwick is one of the 16 earmarked. It's five minutes from a school and is packed late afternoon. Would be sad for children to lose 'outside time'

Kinnerton is a multi-use games area, not really for play

Definite need to look at these places on the ground rather than a map. Some alternatives will not be suitable. Some look nearby but are over a steep hill, busy road etc. Some are on the way home from schools.

Felt like there were a lot of closures in Exwick.

What happens to the land? Worried about loss of green space.

Asked about asset transfer: depends on active communities, they are not everywhere.

*Two women with children*

The Dino Park in Exmouth is very popular

You could generate money with cafes and coffee stands in parks

*Woman with two small children*

Problem with the seesaw in St Thomas play area, dangerous

Lots of services for parents are going - children's centres, swimming pool and crèche, soft play.

These activities combat social isolation, especially for families moving to Exeter

Community takeover has its limitations

There's nothing in the city centre for children to let off steam, open spaces have problems with needles and bottles

The cost of the buses is so high for a family

St Thomas is better for a destination park

Learn from examples in Exeter and Teignmouth

Take the National Trust Wild Park approach, forest play, nature, wilderness areas.

Sustainability is important, hates the Clifton Hill project

*Couple with children*

Walks past Hylton Gardens play area every day and it is very busy after school

The Flowerpot area is for older kids and near the river, so not suitable for small children

Would pay more council tax for better facilities

Could charge for public toilets

Wants to keep green spaces.

Issue of steep hills and busy roads that make alternatives inaccessible

Local residents would be willing to fundraise for new equipment

St Thomas splash area is always packed

*Man walking dog*

Make the good parks bigger and better. Enforce regulations in parks, especially cars being driven into St Thomas. What about dog wardens?

*Couple who are active in their community*

Destination park should be in Cowick Barton rather than Exwick. There has been some investment already but not in play areas. High levels of child obesity there. Poor quality facilities in a highly populated area.

Closure of small play areas is not good, they are the community ones

Money spent on swimming pool project should be spent on play areas.

High costs of public transport

There are a lot of teenagers hanging about in parks because there is no youth strategy

*St Thomas resident with small children*

Has a small garden but the park is like an extension, is very lucky. The splash park is great but parking around the park has become an issue on good days. Cowick Barton good for a destination park

*Grandparents*

Grandparents in the play park at St Thomas asked for another seat in the play park for grandparents accompanying their grandchildren.

*Previous organisers of St Thomas Festival*

Local residents are happy to work with the council where they can. E.g. they have previously offered power (running a wire from their electricity supply) for music in the park for 'play days'.

We would like to see some of these initiatives back:

- Play rangers, who facilitated more creative play
- Other ideas include
- Private businesses might be interested in partnering with local play days

- The Council could provide public liability insurance for play days and other local events
- A youth worker would make things a bit safer – or a ‘snack shack’ could be ‘eyes’ for the Council. It would put drug dealers off.
- Grass cutting
- What limits others volunteering to become involved in active play includes:
  - People are in their own little bubble
  - They don’t want to tread on others’ shoes
  - Too much stress
  - People don’t want to go to committee meetings
  - People don’t want to get roped in to key positions like chairperson or treasurer.

#### **4. Results of the survey**

Marketing Means carried out a survey of residents and stakeholders (both online and face to face) on the Council’s overall Physical Activity Strategy, with some specific questions about play areas. The report is attached as **appendix ?**.

Generally, there is a positive response to the proposals. Stakeholders and residents mostly agreed with the Council’s aims and priorities and thought the approach was generally reasonable.

Proposals were supported with the significant exception of not replacing play equipment in smaller parks. This is the only proposal that is soundly rejected.

One other significant result that links with the conversations we had at the drop in sessions was that the majority of people walk to play areas, with the normal journey being five to ten minutes.

## 5. Key messages from the consultation

Below we have extracted what we perceive to be the key messages for the council to consider.

### Destination Parks

The proposed development of three Destination Parks across the city was raised by several people. Most people were generally in favour of the new developments and were excited to see photographs of a similar facility in Bath. Some people expressed a desire to be involved in the consultation process from an early stage.

However, although no direct objections were raised to this concept in principle, concerns were expressed about potential negative impacts on local parks and play areas. These included:

- Less money and time may be expended on local spaces in order to develop, operate and maintain three high profile parks
- Destination Parks would provide good facilities for many people but residents place a high value on their local parks, green spaces and play areas and the contribution they make to community wellbeing
- Public transport access and costs of travelling to the Destination Parks could be prohibitive for some families. The survey showed that most people walk to play areas.
- Local play areas are crucial for day in, day out regular activity: Destination Parks are great facilities for a wide range of people would be for special day outs and family trips
- Destination Parks may not be suitable for autistic children and or for young people with special needs
- Splash parks are excellent, heavily used facilities and should be available in more local play areas/parks

One or two people raised the following issues:

- Exeter Arena is not really in Pinhoe, as most people think of it
- If the decision has yet to be made on the location of the third Destination Park, why is a location marked in the consultation documentation?
- Plain English should be used throughout the consultation process, so that people are clear about what is being proposed

### Rationalisation of play areas

Although some people accepted that the Council needs to reduce costs and work differently in some areas, the loss of community play areas was opposed by the large majority of people. The reasons given included:

- Anecdotal evidence that some of the 16 play areas under review are well used and highly valued by residents. Hylton Gardens was mentioned by several people, Haccombe Close and Burrator Drive were both mentioned by a few people
- The upgrading of eight play areas was broadly welcomed with the caveat that promises have been made in the past and then not delivered
- Quieter play areas are highly suitable for children with disabilities or specific needs
- Play areas for “all abilities” can work well for some children
- Public transport links and costs are also prohibitive in the context of using alternative play areas in neighbouring areas
- Alternative play areas may look to be within easy reach on the map but in some cases steep climbs or busy traffic levels lie between two areas
- Reduction of green space should be avoided wherever possible, given its contribution to health and wellbeing
- Community groups and individuals may be able to work in partnership with the Council to find a way forward on the future management of some play areas

### **Community Asset Transfer (CAT)**

On the understanding that the Council is seeking to clarify and strengthen its policy on CATs, a number of people were interested in exploring possible options for a mutually agreeable way forward:

- Formal asset transfer procedure for a fixed period of time
- Increased volunteering and fundraising activity by community, provided that insurance arrangements are in place
- A hybrid solution, somewhere between a formal asset transfer and increased voluntary activity

### **Partnership working**

- Representatives from Heavitree Park Life reaffirmed their commitment to developing the park and their willingness to work with the Council on new projects and initiatives. They would like to be kept informed on the decision-making process for the new strategy and for community engagement to be ongoing
- Residents who use Cowick Barton are keen to work with the Council and their Community Builder to develop a programme of events and increase volunteer activities. Contact details have been provided.

### **Operational management of play areas**

The following views emerged from a cross section of people

- There is an overall willingness for the Council to cut the grass less often in parks generally and for volunteers to help with the maintenance of parks and play areas
- Dog control orders, or an equivalent mechanism, should be implemented across all parks and play areas in Exeter.