

Exeter City Council

Report from focus groups on Parks and Open Spaces



Report from **RedQuadrant**

May 2019

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1. Introduction and context

As part of the work on the Council's overall Physical Activity Strategy, RedQuadrant were commissioned to facilitate two focus groups with stakeholders on Exeter's parks and open spaces.

The previous Parks and Open Spaces Strategy dates from 2005. There is now a need to renew this in consultation with communities and other stakeholders. During 2019/20, officers are recommending the following actions:

- Through a series of community and stakeholder workshops identify priorities for the future development of parks and green space strategies and action plans;
- Undertake a current audit and needs assessment of the City's green space, including those in the ownership of other bodies which have existing or potential public access, with a particular focus on the latent activity opportunities that could be developed;
- Map and develop linkage of parks and green space with cycle and footpaths as part of a Green Corridor network across the city, providing safe off-road travel within communities;
- In principle, subject to resources, provide support and opportunity to "start-up" groups wishing to undertake and develop low key but valued activities and social interaction in local parks and green spaces that promote physical activity.

This report sets out the key findings from the focus groups.

2. Focus groups – Parks and Open Spaces

We held two focus groups on 12th April 2019, at Exeter Community Centre with 25 people attending in total. People and groups who were involved in some way with parks and open spaces were invited by the council to participate.

The aims for the sessions were:

- To get stakeholder views on existing parks and green spaces
- To begin to identify future priorities
- To identify how parks and green spaces can be used to promote physical activity and social interaction
- To establish how best to get a wide range of views in community consultation

At the beginning of each session, Paul Faulkner, Head of Parks, introduced the context for the development of a parks strategy, stressing that there are opportunities for the Council to:

- Work more closely with other local authorities
- Obtain community focused funding through new health and wellbeing strategies
- Work in partnership with community groups to protect and develop green spaces
- Be involved in village green and similar community development projects
- Make Exeter the most active city in England

The tables below show the key points from the subsequent discussions:

Development of a strategic approach
<p>There was strong agreement on the following points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Process for next steps of developing the strategy needs to be widely and clearly communicated ● Ask the community for help at an early stage and involve them in developing initiatives/plans ● Speak to community forums (e.g. open event on 29/6/19) regularly and work closely with Active Devon, Devon Wildlife Trust, Ludwell Life and Friends groups

- Improve communication with residents and stakeholders, e.g. direct mailing, more use of the Exeter Citizen, social media
- Align the new strategy with the NHS strategy for wellbeing
- No more green space should be lost. It would be detrimental to the whole city and to Council priorities
- Need to have a clear and robust Community Asset Transfer policy
- Green spaces improve mental health: include as a key theme
- Have fitness equipment, outdoor gyms and ping pong tables in parks as installed in many authorities across England
- The parks strategy needs some clear principles to shape its development including biodiversity, accessibility, green space within x distance of all home
- Need to strike a balance between physical activity and horticulture and wildlife
- Locally developed solutions delivered with volunteers can offset costs e.g. litter picking and guerrilla gardening
- Establish clear boundaries and publish guidelines on the role and remit of volunteers and how they work with council officers
- Community Builders have an important role to play in the development of green spaces in local communities

A number of people agreed with the following points:

- Use Plain English in all communications to residents
- Ensure teenagers feel welcome in parks
- Set up focus groups in the colleges to get the views of young people
- Expand the Exeter Green Space Network
- Parks play an important role in reducing pollution levels

- ECC to support long term leases for appropriate amenities e.g. community cafes
- Communicate benefits of volunteering in parks, including increased well-being, social interaction, reduction of isolation as well as physical benefits
- Clarify what the council will do and what volunteers can do. These boundaries to be guidelines but permeable by agreement
- Develop a programme of wide-ranging community events in parks, including toddler activities and bingo sessions
- Farmers' markets in parks can link to allotments, food growing and healthy eating

The following points were made by one or two **individuals**

- The Council is at risk of selling off the family silver.
- Important for ECC departments to work together and not in the existing silos e.g. ECC planning policy not to build cul-de-sacs in new developments is wrong. Children living in new developments, can't play in the street
- People who are happy with their parks are happy with their council
- ECC boasts it has the lowest Council Tax in the Country. Why not put it up?
- Balance in how money is spent e.g. £52m for new leisure centre but no money for maintaining local assets
- There should be an opportunity to respond directly to councillors on the draft policy: that they should have attended the consultation meeting.
- The Council promotes Exeter to employers and prospective students to attract people from outside the city; this needs to be balanced with the needs of local residents.
- Make 'going for a stroll' or going for a ride on a disability scooter a valid (listed) activity for parks and open spaces as otherwise it may be taken for granted
- New sports facilities could be in direct competition with businesses

Operational management of parks and open spaces

There was **strong agreement** on the following points:

- Create more wild spaces in parks
- Cut the grass less often in some instances
- Don't use so much weed killer and, when it is used, take care how and where
- Improve signage to parks and green spaces
- Events in parks run by community groups need to be centrally coordinated
- Consider implementing a community warden scheme

A **number of** people agreed on the following points

- It would be helpful to know the running costs of parks e.g. staff and equipment
- Introduce dog control orders for the number of dogs one person can walk.
- Promote use of social media to draw attention to problems in parks and open spaces
- Volunteer led fitness activities increase participation levels in parks
- Explore options for a roving ranger service

The following points were made by one or two **individuals**

- Introduce an on-demand grass-cutting service
- Local residents are willing to help with grass cutting
- All trees should have Tree Protection Orders
- Developers put in new play areas and leave them to the community to maintain
- Introduce a network/system for contact with the Council e.g. who to contact for grass-cutting, needle removal, planting planning, fire hazards

- Explore possibilities for an umbrella insurance to cover risks of residents gardening/working in parks (like the RHS 'Exeter in Bloom' insurance)
- Use park noticeboards to create dialogue between council workers and volunteers.
- Volunteer community wardens are in place in a few parks: this could be expanded

3. Conclusions

The discussions were lively and stimulating, there is an obvious passion for Exeter's parks and open spaces and a determination to retain and develop them. Participants understood the financial situation the Council is in and are willing to help by being involved in the maintenance and development of parks and open spaces.

Below are the key issues we believe need to be addressed:

Community involvement in the strategy

We spoke to two groups of people who represent a powerful community network. They understood the key issues and have much to contribute in terms of ideas and resources. During our discussions we identified several emerging strategic objectives:

- Commit to maintaining and protecting green spaces in the city
- Develop a clear policy on Community Asset Transfer
- Align with Exeter's health and wellbeing strategies
- Make biodiversity a key theme
- Commit to making parks and open spaces accessible to all

People are keen to be involved in the development of the strategy, co-creating with the council.

Communication

The groups felt that communication could be better, and regular engagement would bring benefits to the council. See below.

Community involvement in managing parks

There is a clear need to develop a more joined up approach to how the council/community maintains green spaces. Communities are willing to take responsibility for tasks such as grass cutting, planting and litter picking, as well as activities. There is also a strong wish to involve young people.

Community asset transfer

This area needs clarification by the council, as there were conflicting perceptions.