
Northbrook Park Proposal Update

September 2021



Northbrook Park 2020

Photo: Andy Thatcher

Produced by: Devon Wildlife Trust, Cricklepit Mill, Commercial Road, Exeter, EX2 4AB

Tel: (01392) 279244 Fax: (01392) 433221 E-mail: contactus@devonwildlifetrust.org

Web site: www.devonwildlifetrust.org Registered charity, no 213224

1. Summary

The collaboration between Exeter City Council (ECC) and Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT) has made significant progress in developing the vision for Northbrook Park over the past 18 months, despite the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. Exeter City Council's Executive met in February 2020 and supported a draft vision developed between Devon Wildlife Trust and Exeter City Council Officers. Since then, the partners have consulted the community and have progressed the initial development of a detailed delivery plan.

We received **755 results** from the online survey in the Spring this year, which represents a very high response rate and considerable interest in the future of the land. The stand-out result was an overwhelming **96% in support of the vision**. The clear message from the various responses to the survey was that people strongly prioritise wildlife enhancement in this space. Workshops with more than 20 local stakeholder group representatives led by DWT provided valuable insights into communities' thoughts, experiences and concerns, and firmly echoed the results of the survey in their wishes for the site to be maintained as a "peaceful and tranquil" community space.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an update and overview of our experience over the past months. It will set out how this has shaped our understanding of the potential of Northbrook Park as an inspiring and popular greenspace, wildlife corridor and community resource. This is not a full report on the findings of the consultation, nor a detailed delivery plan, but an update and overview to enable partners to consider our proposed approach to the next steps.



The Devon Countryside Access Forum visiting Northbrook Park July 2021

2. Background

The potential project originated in 2019 when ECC decided to close the pitch and putt golf course which occupied Northbrook Park and was operated for the Council as part of its leisure provision. After some discussion around potential future uses for the site, the Council committed to maintaining this area as a community greenspace. DWT helped to develop a proposal for the site (Northbrook Approach: Joint Proposal for the Future, January 2020) and in February 2020 the Executive committed to working with DWT to consult on this vision. DWT has taken on the management of the city's countryside Valley Parks in 2019, and the largest of these, Ludwell and Riverside, sit either side of Northbrook Park. The vision we put forward in early 2020 can be summarised as:

- **A wild arboretum and community orchard:** trees and meadows abundant in wildlife and accessible for communities
- **A people and nature corridor:** a re-wilded Northbrook stream through the site, and an improved green travel route connecting Ludwell and Riverside Valley Park - providing a resilient corridor for wildlife and access for people
- **A learning and community hub:** the greenspace and onsite facilities enabling strong engagement and participation within the community, with a focus on outdoor learning.

The launch of the consultation was significantly delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic which prevented onsite and in-person consultation. As restrictions and uncertainty about the pandemic continued we decided to delay no further and consult remotely, which occurred in Spring this year. The vision gained exceptionally strong support.

In the meantime a number of other contextual factors have emerged or progressed:

- **The Covid-19 pandemic:** national and local restrictions combined with the experience of living through this extraordinary and challenging time, has encouraged people to explore and to value local greenspaces, perhaps more than ever.
- **Parks and Greenspace, Trees and Woodlands, and other strategies:** with accelerating threats from the climate and nature crises, ECC has developed a number of local strategies for strengthening the city's natural resources and resilience.
- **Liveable Exeter:** The Liveable Exeter programme recognises the importance of local, accessible, high quality public green spaces, to the future development of the City. The balance of accessibility, enhanced biodiversity and providing good green travel opportunities is a key challenge to address as part of the programme.
- **Local projects:** the proposal to naturalise the Northbrook stream has progressed with funding, chiefly from the Environment Agency, in 2021/22 towards a feasibility study. The Live and Move programme led by Exeter City Council and Sport England has also made progress in re-vamping the Green Circle route which runs through the site.

3. Consultation summary

HEADLINES

755 survey results – mainly from individuals, all within Exeter, with 88% having visited the site before

20 organisations and groups participated in workshops (as well as **12 organisations** responding to the survey)

96% of those surveyed supported the vision.



Reasons to visit

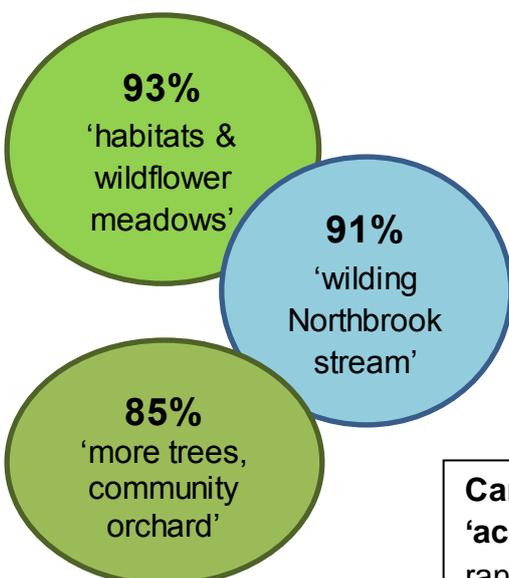


30% had visited for **'wildlife'** whilst **78% expect to in future** – *by far the biggest increase.*

PRIORITIES

84% of people selected **'greenspace and wildlife corridor protected'** as first priority (versus 'active travel connections' and 'social space').

Top rated features

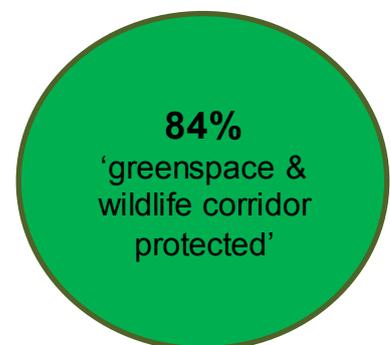


Top rated access feature



Car-park was rated the lowest 'access' priority with only 6% ranking it as very important.

Top priority



Other access priorities such as **accessible paths and cycling provision** received **more than 60% support**. Workshop discussions and comments signalled that key issues to resolve for local people were conflicts associated with the *dual-use path for pedestrians and cyclists* and *access in and out of and around the site*.

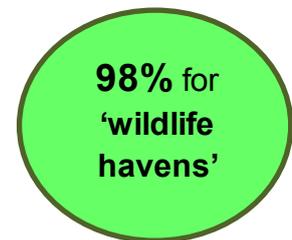
Space for play and learning received **more than 50% support**. Workshop discussions included an *interest in the potential for a community 'hub'* and *strong support for limited parking for those who need it most*. There was however concern that the car-park and building might attract too much traffic to the site, detracting from its special qualities and tranquillity.

LUDWELL TO RIVERSIDE

Responses about the wider landscape through Ludwell and Riverside strongly echoed that people prioritise wildlife above all, with **98%** rating **'wildlife havens'**, and **96%** rating **'peace and tranquillity'** as important / very important for the area.

Other insights were consistent with the Northbrook Park responses, whilst adding detail:

- **76%** would like **spaces for children, families and outdoor learning**
- **86%** wanted **good paths and signage, benches and bins**
- **64%** wanted **marked walking running and cycling routes**
- **43%** placed importance on **places to exercise a dog**, but
- **58%** wanted **more places with dog restrictions**



The strongest messages from the survey and workshops combined were that **people supported the vision**, **prioritised wildlife** and wanted **Northbrook Park to remain a tranquil place**.

The results reported here are a summary of the key results and snapshots only.

We aim to publish the full results of the survey and summary of the whole consultation, later in the Autumn, including the questions and answers which related to the wider 'Ludwell and Riverside landscape'.

BUILDING ON THE CONSULTATION

The key insights from the consultation, and how they will help our ongoing planning, are summarised here:

- **There is very strong engagement with Northbrook Park and with the vision** so we will continue to develop relationships with stakeholders and to 'co-create' plans for the site.
- **There is strong support for the site to be a wildlife haven and a tranquil space**, with an emphasis on space for nature including meadows, trees, orchards, and a rewilded Northbrook stream. There are a diverse range of partners who want to help develop this vision, and be involved.
- **People also want to see access improved** so that they can enjoy and engage with the space, and participate in the development of a community resource.
- **There is support for the site to host activities**, but with an emphasis on lower-key events that would be in keeping with its tranquil nature, rather than large or formal group activities.

Some insights will require much more investigation for detailed planning:

There is particular interest in improving access around the site, and into it

- The need to reduce barriers to access for people and wildlife is a key focus.
- Resolving the need for cycle access through the site, whilst *prioritising a slower-pedestrian-friendly route* is a clear priority.
- The most ambitious suggestion, which was made several times, was for a 'green' or 'nature' bridge across the Topsham Road. That would be a major capital project in itself and outside of the immediate scope, but the overall aim should be noted and developed.

There is support for the building to be a 'hub' perhaps with refreshments available

- However there is no strong or consistent vision for this and indeed some concern that it would become too busy or urbanised.
- This suggests that we should work with nearby facilities such as the current Wonford Community and Learning Centre / future Wonford Hub project and the Countess Wear Village Hall which provide space and facilities for more formal activities.
- Communities need to develop a strong vision for low-key participation and outdoor learning at Northbrook Park.
- Potential uses for the building and car-park should be further investigated, and associated costs identified. A 'test and learn' approach with trial delivery could be developed.

Responses relating to the wider Ludwell and Riverside landscape are broadly consistent with those relating to Northbrook park and-

- They help to provide a clearer picture of priorities for different areas.
- Responses suggest that we need to develop the proposal within the wider landscape setting, taking into account the unique features of each zone.

4. Updating the vision

The vision jointly presented early last year gained overwhelming support during the consultation this year. The more detailed proposal, in development, is therefore largely based on this original vision with minor adaptations. The insights we gained from the consultation, combined with the progress of other contextual factors, will enable us to develop the proposal in much greater detail.

The following is a summary of the key features of the proposal and how we will need to develop them:

Element	Priorities and opportunities	Key actions	Issues to resolve	Who will be involved
Wild arboretum and community orchard	<p>Strong support – enhancing wildlife was the top priority.</p> <p>More than 90% support for more meadows and for naturalising Northbrook stream.</p> <p>Northbrook stream re-wilding project.</p>	<p>Biodiversity survey</p> <p>Detailed enhancement plans for meadows and orchards.</p>	<p>The Highly Modified (engineered) Northbrook stream has low ecological function. It suffers from flash floods, and pollution incidents.</p>	<p>Local Authorities and Environment Agency.</p> <p>Community groups and volunteers (who have shown strong interest).</p>
Linking greenspaces	<p>Priorities are:</p> <p>Strengthening the wildlife corridor</p> <p>Linking greenspaces for people, especially across the Topsham Road ‘barrier’. Green bridge ambition!</p> <p>Improved access around the site and places to pause.</p>	<p>Improving access directly into the site from Topsham Road.</p> <p>Network of paths around the site.</p>	<p>Dual cycle / pedestrian path – needs to be separated or slowed down.</p> <p>Flooding of current path adjacent to the Northbrook.</p> <p>Potential issues with littering, anti-social behaviour and dogs.</p>	<p>Local Authorities and eg Environment Agency (those involved in planning and managing assets and infrastructure). Community groups.</p> <p>Accessibility representatives.</p>
People and communities	<p>Wide variety of audiences and groups interested in getting involved, including older local residents and families.</p>	<p>Bring the space into wider use with improved access (eg path network) and engagement features (eg natural ‘bench’</p>	<p>Balance improved access and use with retaining quiet tranquil space.</p>	<p>Local community groups and volunteers.</p> <p>DWT Outdoor Learning team.</p>



	<p>Greater interest in quiet enjoyment than intensive group activity. Eg outdoor learning /activity (for all age groups).</p> <p>Activities need to complement local provision (eg Wonford Hub and Countess Wear Village Hall).</p>	<p>features and orchards).</p>		
Visitor hub	<p>Variety of ideas for the building as a hub, a learning base and community café (as per original proposal).</p> <p>Concern from local stakeholders that the building/car-park shouldn't become too busy and detract from the park's special qualities as a tranquil space.</p>	<p>Develop ideas and test and trial use of facilities (building/car-park) to support outdoor learning and community activities.</p> <p>Consider the potential for the car-park to have limited priority use – for example for accessibility.</p>	<p>Balance use of the facilities with need to retain tranquil nature of the park.</p> <p>Avoid duplication – Wonford Hub being developed very nearby, and existing programme at Countess Wear Village hall.</p>	<p>Local community groups and volunteers.</p> <p>DWT Outdoor Learning team.</p>
Wider landscape (Ludwell to Riverside)	<p>Strongest response to questions about the wider landscape was 98% supporting the proposal of 'wildlife havens'.</p> <p>Strong support for enhanced access features (86%).</p>	<p>Northbrook Park is the connecting corridor between the city's two largest greenspaces.</p> <p>Ludwell and Riverside benefit from unique features so we need a strong plan for this landscape to support greater coherence and added value.</p> <p>Projects to naturalise the Northbrook stream and to revamp the Green Circle route help to link</p>	<p>Balancing the needs of wildlife, visitors and growing communities through these spaces - including families, older adults, cyclists and dog walkers.</p>	<p>Communities and agencies.</p> <p>Liveable Exeter Programme</p>



		<p>these greenspaces.</p> <p>Plans for new local communities through 'Liveable Exeter' recognise the need to incorporate strong greenspace provision.</p>		
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5. Cost estimates

Full costings will require a detailed delivery plan to be agreed alongside a proposed partnership delivery model. Our informed estimates, based on experience of similar projects, at this stage are as follows:

Element	Cost estimate
Capital core (basic site infrastructure and habitat works) Tree and orchard planting Tree pruning – crown lifting Upgraded and re-routed access paths Signage and access furniture Meadow restoration	£125,000
Revenue core (annual management and maintenance)	£25,000

The above estimates exclude: capital costs associated with the building and car-park (which needs further investigation), dangerous ash tree removal due to ash dieback, other ancillary projects including the Northbrook stream re-wilding project, and the delivery of a green bridge.

The estimates also exclude project management costs.

6. Next steps

Exeter City Council and Devon Wildlife Trust presented a joint vision for Northbrook Park and have now consulted on this vision. The vision gained overwhelming support and the consultation has provided crucial insights to help to develop our vision into a more detailed plan. At this point we consider the next steps to include:

Action	Who/when
Agree detailed development costs and optimal delivery models. Agree a funding plan to enable development and delivery	ECC/partners- <i>starting with ECC Exec October</i>
Publish the results from the public survey and a summary of the whole consultation	ECC/DWT, this Autumn
Develop the communications and stakeholder plan as a basis for community involvement in the co-creation of plans	(ECC/DWT, this Winter) - TBC
Develop a test/trial proposal for use of building and car-park, along with a capital budget	(ECC/DWT, 2022) - TBC
Developing a detailed delivery plan for the whole site with communities and partners	(ECC/DWT, 2022) - TBC



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