

Extract from Liveable Exeter webpage <https://www.liveableexeter.co.uk/news/2021-trends-greenspace/>

Green Space in an Urban Setting

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At the heart of the Liveable Exeter vision is the aim to improve quality of life for people living in the city, a huge component of which is, among other things, having equal access to green space. During the Coronavirus pandemic, the one activity that everybody has been able to participate in, regardless of where they live, is a daily walk or bike ride, and those living in Exeter have benefitted from the City's green spaces and proximity to the countryside.

We know how important access to green space is to mental and physical health. Just how easy is it to fit it into our plans for developing sustainable urban communities?

It is impossible to create a vision for Exeter which includes the building of 12,000 new homes without also discussing the need for equal access to green space. Greener environments are a vital component to any community and are widely recognised as enabling the promotion of good physical health. They are also associated with better mental health and wellbeing, and social prescribing is now widely used to help to combat many health-related problems, including through the work of Live and Move Exeter and Wellbeing Exeter.

Most importantly, "green space can help to bind communities together, reduce loneliness, and mitigate the negative effects of air pollution." (Source: Public Health England)

The city is fortunate to be framed by six Valley Parks, 140 hectares in total, which are managed by Devon Wildlife Trust, as well as other urban green areas. Views

from the city can stretch to green fields, Haldon Hill and Dartmoor. The city also benefits from the Green Circle walk, stretching for 12 miles around the city.

But it's not enough to just see green spaces and to know that they are there – it is important that our communities have a sense of ownership over these environments and must feel that they belong within them. They must understand their place within these spaces and should have a say on how they are used.

So, whilst it is easy to understand just how big a part they play in planning urban communities, it isn't quite so easy to establish them as natural spaces within, perhaps say, high density housing developments, and retail areas. This, says Liveable Exeter's Richard Marsh, is where urban planning really comes into its own: "Some of the Liveable developments will be high density and built on brownfield sites, where there isn't easy access to usable green spaces for each dwelling. So, this is where the idea of linked communities, and sustainable transport comes into its own. By ensuring easy movement between areas and green spaces that are accessible to all, communities can be genuinely connected, and these areas used and enjoyed by everybody."

Green spaces offer so much more than simply somewhere to go for a walk or bike ride. In fact, they are so important for the health of a community that they must go hand in hand with any development that a city such as Exeter undertakes. Therefore, collaboration and consultation between planners and communities is a vital part of the process.

Eleanor Tomlinson is the programme manager for Wellbeing Exeter and explains: "The phrase 'health and wellbeing' doesn't just refer to good physical health, but to better mental health and wellbeing too, something that the work of Wellbeing Exeter is aiming to support, and that makes communities thrive. In 2020, we saw even more in our work with individuals and communities how important green space is to wellbeing, especially when coming together indoors is not possible. People benefit in so many ways from being connected to their local communities and enabling them to be outside and part of that community is hugely important for all of us."

We have spoken here about the Valley Parks, and the need to ensure equal access to green space in future housing developments. There are also other opportunities for ensuring that green environments within Exeter are used to their full potential.

One such example is the former Northbrook Park Golf Course, a large site on the Topsham Road leading into the city centre. The city council, alongside Devon Wildlife Trust, is currently consulting with the public to ensure that this site will be used to its full potential:

Peter Burgess from Devon Wildlife Trust says: “Northbrook is a stunning site which plays a crucial role in connecting people, wildlife and cultural history in the city ... this is a community space and we want local residents to get involved and provide us with their ideas about how we can maximise its value and breathe new life into this much loved area.”

So, we know communities must collaborate on green spaces, but how else can we ensure long term use of green environments in Exeter? Part of the trick here is to enable a variety of uses, and to ensure that residents from all walks of life have something on offer within them.

Dom Jinks from Exeter Culture certainly hopes to see green spaces used in this way and wants to ensure that residents are consulted at the earliest possible stage so that they can inform how the space might be used in the future.

“We have a real opportunity here to make Exeter a pioneer city in terms of the green agenda and sustainability, and key to that is nurturing and facilitating cultural practices that help us to develop deeper relationships and interactions with our environment. Arts and culture can play a major role in planning for distinctive neighbourhoods, and in working with and through new and existing communities, to give residents a sense of ownership. In the short term, making the most of outdoor spaces will be vital for audiences hungry to engage in cultural activities as well as artists wanting to safely share their work; long-term, Exeter can lead the way in ‘hybrid solutions’, making much greater use of the outdoors as a cultural resource and leading on planning and design solutions which put culture centre stage.”

Finally, one cannot talk about urban green space without reference to Exeter's target of becoming carbon neutral by 2030 – more green space and connected communities are a vital part of achieving this. Green areas of course help to absorb and store carbon, help to reduce the risks and mitigate the effects of flooding, reduce noise pollution and play a partial role in mitigating air pollution. These areas also support animal and plant species. And with most urban car journeys less than two miles in length (Source:devon.gov.uk/roadsandtransport), it is clear that ensuring local residents have green space and communities that are connected to each other by that green space, is vital.

Urban green spaces are more than just parks and fields but also provide vital means of connecting people and building communities. It is therefore critical that those communities are involved in establishing the green spaces in the first places, collaborating on their use and thus enabling as many people to use them for as many purposes as possible. Enabling residents to have some ownership over how their green space is used, ensures some sense of stewardship over them for years to come.

Exeter has huge ambitions with its Liveable Exeter vision, which of course includes its target to become carbon neutral by 2030. The adoption of multiple green spaces and ensuring their use by different sectors of society is vital in the creation of sustainable, linked communities and should remain at the heart of any development strategy