

Statement in response to consultation on Exeter Parks and Green Space Strategy from Exeter Green Party

Status of the document and consultation

For a document professing to be a strategy, the Exeter Parks and Green Space Strategy contains many aspirational ideas but few concrete actions. This is particularly evident in the public consultation which contains a series of worthy statements that are difficult to disagree with. As an organisation we have responded to the official consultation but also want to make additional observations.

Positive points

As an aspirational document, there is much to welcome. In particular the emphasis on investing in horticultural training to raise standards and improve habitat biodiversity and the aim to reduce chemical use. We also note the intention to invest in 'carbon neutral approaches' but wonder whether Exeter's green spaces offer the potential to go further and sequester carbon, so becoming carbon positive.

We also welcome the desire to work with communities to identify the potential to improve green space use and inclusivity. We believe that a platform could be created for individuals and communities to submit ideas on where/how green spaces could be joined up, expanded and improved, regardless of ownership, as well as potential spaces that could be opened up for wider use by creating new pathways, maps etc. Two examples are the green space south of Bonhay Road owned by the Environment Agency and the green patch by the allotments between the river and canal at Haven Banks.

As a Party that has advocated Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) levels need to be based on the environmental credentials of developments and used to enhance environmental assets and sustainable development in the city, we welcome plans to ensure that CIL receipts are allocated to support the development of parks and green space. Further funding for parks and open spaces could be sought through Section 106.

Our concerns

We have several concerns.

Firstly, in relation to the quantity of green space in Exeter, the figures are unclear and potentially misleading. It claims that "Using the Fields in Trust recommendations, Exeter exceeds the criteria."

However, we would query the figures used and welcome clarification. The strategy states total green space within the city to be 246Ha, which is in fact 40% lower than the Fields in Trust total recommendation of 417.28Ha for the population of Exeter. Even when the categories of green space are looked at individually, current green space is less than each recommendation. If this is indeed the case, a much bolder strategy will be essential to make up the shortfall in provision of vital green space within the city.

It is clear with ever increasing living density in the city centre, e.g., through a push for Co-living, student block developments and redevelopment of brownfield sites etc, green space per head of population in the city centre is declining and pressure on the limited formal green spaces is ever increasing. There is a clear link between housing policy and its impacts on green spaces and this needs to be fully acknowledged and addressed.

Secondly, we are concerned about the idea of offloading some or all of the city parks and green space into a Trust. A Trust will need to generate income and will require a substantial dowry to get it off the ground. As if in acknowledgement of this, there is the worrying suggestion that the ownership and liability of Exeter's parks and open spaces could involve corporate funding and sponsorship. There are suggestions that the USA and Australia models would be good to emulate, *where corporations find their public image enhanced and the tax bill reduced by funding public parks*, is not acceptable.

This shows a concerning enthusiasm for the privatisation of our green spaces. We oppose the involvement, or interference, of corporations in our green spaces. In other places, and in order to generate income, this has resulted in expensive leisure activities such as *Go Ape* being introduced or a stream of income generating events. This can result in degradation of the green spaces which in turn can impact on wildlife and biodiversity. Such corporate activities also risk making parks elitist when they should be equally accessible and enjoyed by all.

We do however, welcome the current arrangement with the Devon Wildlife Trust in managing the city's valley parks and would advocate if there is to be any future 'Trust' arrangement, it should involve similar organisations who have a track record in maintaining and enhancing green spaces with a view to protecting them and increasing biodiversity.

We note the suggestion of offering community involvement, management and transfer options for parks and green spaces in whole or in part. Any transfer would need to be into a single body such as a charitable community benefit society which is fully transparent and owned by Exeter residents and the Council. Exeter City Council has previously promised an asset transfer policy allowing community organisations to work in partnership with the Council to take on ownership and management of community assets, but this has not been forthcoming. We believe that any land transfer arrangement must contribute to a coherent land management plan for the city in terms of achieving social, ecological benefits and climate targets. The council should also develop a volunteering and apprenticeship programme - that can both involve individuals and community organisations.

Finally, we are concerned at the aim to *assess the need and demand for good quality accessible toilets at formal parks*. Public toilets must be maintained and enhanced, not 'assessed' for their need. As far as we are concerned - and feedback from the public backs this up - they are needed.