

Exter Plan Examination Note:

Background and evidence relating to open space position

Introduction:

This note has been compiled for the Exeter Plan examination to provide clarity regarding the robust, evidence led, approach taken by Exeter City Council to open space.

Context:

Open space is key to Exeter's spatial strategy and to delivering the Liveable Exeter initiative. The City Council's Corporate Plan has well maintained parks and open spaces at its heart, helping to deliver the 'People' and 'Sustainable Environment' strategic priorities¹.

In 2022 independent academic research from the University of Sheffield looked at 68 cities in the UK and scored them according to mean greenness, tree canopy cover and percentage green space. Exeter came out on top overall, with the best combined score of all cities. It was the highest ranked city for greenness, the second best city for tree canopy cover and the third best for greenspace coverage. Furthermore in 2026 the latest Sport England survey² places Exeter as the most active authority in England.

This is the result of a sustained focus by the City Council on the importance of open space in supporting development, economic growth and a healthy society.

Partnerships:

Since 2017 the City Council has been working in partnership with Sport England when it launched the 'Live and Move' programme as one of only twelve Sport England local delivery pilots in the country. Sport England's and the City Council's significant investment has helped to ensure exceptional outcomes for the population of Exeter and has helped inform strategy and policy for open space in the Exeter Plan.

The City Council and Devon Wildlife Trust also share a long-standing and active partnership, with collaboration focusing on managing open space, increasing nature wildlife habitat and engaging the community with nature. Since 2019 the City Council passed over the everyday management of the six valley park green spaces to Devon Wildlife Trust, ensuring the future of the city's green lungs.

¹ [Corporate Plan 2025-2028 - Introduction - Exeter City Council](#)

² [Active Lives Adult Survey November 2024-25 Report](#), page 18

Evidence:

Significant work has been undertaken to ensure that Exeter has a robust approach to open space provision and to ensure that the provision delivers for Exeter's population:

- Playing pitch strategy (2022) - [EVB-IF-03: Exeter Playing Pitch Strategy](#) (an update is currently being completed, due for adoption in 2026).
- Recognising and capturing the SANG potential of Valley Parks [EVB-NE-05: Recognising and capturing the Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace \(SANG\) potential of the Valley Parks](#)
- Green Infrastructure Strategy: [EVB-NE-09e: Green Infrastructure Strategy Phase II](#)
- Tree and Woodland strategy – [EXM-02ah Post-submission Tree and Woodland Strategy 2023-33](#)
- Live and Move Everyday Active Strategy 2022 - [Live-and-Move-Everyday-Active-Strategy-2022.pdf](#)
- Parks and Green Spaces consultation - [Consultation and engagement - Exeter City Council](#)
- Valuing Exeter's Urban Forest [EVB-NE-06: Valuing Exeter's Urban Forest](#)
- Exeter Wild City project - [Exeter Wild City | Devon Wildlife Trust](#)
- Wild Exeter – A city for people and nature Wild Exeter – [Wild Exeter – A city for people and nature | Engage Exeter](#)

Existing provision:

As a result of significant work undertaken in the early 2020s the City Council has a good understanding of existing open space provision within its boundaries; both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Exeter has a total of 433 ha of publicly accessible green space (with 248 ha of ECC open space, a further 152 ha in accessible valley parks and 32.5 ha allotments). The types of publicly accessible open space provision, ownership and management responsibilities are listed at Appendix A. To establish operational priorities a Parks and Green Space consultation was undertaken in 2020 (see Appendix B); the outcomes of this have underpinned the operation of the service.

Exeter also performs well when compared to Natural England's 'Accessible Greenspace Standard' which suggests local authorities should have at least 3 hectares of publicly accessible greenspace per 1000 population. On this basis Exeter, with a population of 130,000 people, would require at least 390 ha of accessible green space. As Exeter has a total of 433ha of publicly accessible green space it exceeds this standard.

Exeter is unusual in that much of its semi-natural green space is owned by the City Council and managed directly for the benefit of the residents of Exeter by Devon Wildlife Trust. Furthermore, over the past 10 years the Council has purchased privately owned land to provide open space for the population of Exeter to enjoy. This approach will continue going forward, with negotiations ongoing in relation to future land purchases.

Review of existing open space provision:

A desktop study, supplemented by site visits, was undertaken to review all existing open space designations in 2025 (see Appendix C for details). This led to the amendment and addition of several areas of land covered by the open space designation and the removal of the open space designation from two areas (all resulting modifications to the Proposals Map are detailed in 'Policies map schedule of suggested modifications' CSD-05).

New strategic scale open space provision:

The Exeter Plan adds four strategic scale areas of open space as Valley Parks:

- Whitycombe Valley Park
- Northbrook Valley Park
- Clyst Valley Park
- An extension to Savoy Hill Valley Park.

The evidence for these designations is detailed in the hearing statement (CS11) and is set out in 'Evidence to support NE2 valley parks' (EVB-NE-03).

These areas of land, totalling an additional 53 ha, add to Exeter's existing provision of open space.

Open space provision for proposed new development:

In terms of new provision associated directly with development, the Exeter Plan adheres to the latest Fields in Trust guidelines for open space (Fields in Trust Standards: Creating great spaces for all³) which are widely acknowledged as the primary source of guidance regarding outdoor space provision by national and local government and so will be used to inform assessments of additional open space requirements.

Future approach:

In recognition of its central role in delivering Exeter's development aspirations, the City Council's focus on open space will remain. Specific elements to be taken forward include:

- Delivery of the playing pitch strategy - protecting, enhancing and providing new open space and related outdoor sports facilities.
- Continuing the Live and Move initiative - improving accessibility to open space and supporting community led improvements.
- Improving access and enhancing the Valley Parks and Green Circle

³ [Fields in Trust Standards: Creating great spaces for all](#)

- Making major investment in key open spaces such as King George V Playing Fields and those at Wondford Community Wellbeing Hub. The latter has planning permission with funding agreed.

The City Council has also committed to become a Nature City⁴ - a scheme which recognises urban areas putting green infrastructure at the heart of their communities. Consultation to support Foundation (Level 1) accreditation has already taken place⁵. The results of this will help create an action plan setting out projects to deliver going forward.

Overall, the strategy for open space needs to have due consideration to the outcome of the Local Government Review process. A new unitary authority is likely to have a different assets portfolio which may require strategy to be revisited. Accordingly, in the context of the clear evidence which is already in place, the uncertainties over the future geographies of local planning authority boundaries in the Exeter area mean it would be a challenging time to undertake further analysis of open space needs. Such evidence would be likely to become obsolete within a short time.

⁴ [Nature Towns and Cities Programme: Transforming Urban Landscapes for People and Planet – Natural England](#)

⁵ [Wild Exeter – A city for people and nature | Engage Exeter](#)

Appendix A

Table of publicly accessible green space in Exeter

Owner	Type of green space	Area m2	Area ha
DCC	Informal local green space (grass verges)	20,683	2.06
PRIVATE	Informal local green space	53,765	5.37
ECC	Active sports space	858,611	85.86
ECC	Formal parks and gardens	349,583	34.95
ECC	Informal local green space	767,505	76.75
ECC	Natural and semi-natural urban green space (green corridors)	512,990	51.29
ECC Valley Parks (DWT-managed)	Natural and semi-natural urban green space (green corridors)	1,521,184	152.11
ECC	Allotments	320,828	32.08
Environment Agency	Informal local green space	NA	
Environment Agency	Natural and semi-natural urban green space (green corridors)	68,514	6.85
Forestry Commission	Natural and semi-natural urban green space (green corridors)	500,847	50.08
Private	Children and young people's space (play space) (LEAPS)	14,391	1.43
University	Formal Parks and gardens	300,000	30.00
University	Informal local green space	350,000	35.00
University	Natural and semi-natural urban green space (green corridors)	200,000	20.00

Note: ECC owned green space highlighted in green

Appendix B

Parks and Green Space – Extract from 2020 consultation

'We are determined that valued community greenspace will not be lost to development, and that biodiversity and climate change management need to be central to measures to manage greenspace within Exeter and beyond. As housing density increases and garden space decreases, especially for those families that are most in need, the values of public greenspace increases.

We are looking for answers to these questions.

- How do we ensure our Parks and Green Spaces meet the needs of Exeter's communities?
- What should our priorities be in the light of continuing funding reductions?
- How do we ensure that we can maintain our Parks and Green Spaces for and with the community, particularly as the community will be an important part of parks management?'

Appendix C

Desktop open space review (July 2025)

Open space designations were reviewed to ensure they are still justified and reasonable and to ensure no open space was excluded from designation.

Specific tasks undertaken:

- Review using local knowledge
- Site visits
- Compare with current Exeter Local Plan First Review mapping
- Compare with Google maps
- Include school playing fields
- Review playing pitch strategy
- Tidy-up boundaries where a single area of open space has various internal boundaries.

New open space designations added/amended following Regulation 19 consultation:

- Land south of Tesco Store, Russel Way (added)
- Exeter Arena, Exhibition Field (amended)
- Topsham Sports Ground, Topsham (amended)
- Western Way, Polsloe (added)
- Beacon Lane Allotments (amended)

Plus, all playing fields and open space associated with schools across Exeter's administrative area were also added.

Open space designation removed following Regulation 19 consultation:

- End of Stadium Way, St James
- Dorothy Holman Youth and Community Centre, Topsham