

Exeter Plan Examination – Matter 14

Local Green Space: County Hall grounds

Exeter City Council Position Statement

1. Issue

At the Matter 14 hearing session for the Exeter Plan on 14 May, discussions covered Policy IF4: Open space, play areas, allotments and sport. This focused in particular on the County Hall grounds in St Leonard's. The issue is whether a request by the St Leonard's Neighbourhood Association (SLNA) for designation of part of the County Hall grounds as Local Green Space (LGS) was duly made, and if so, why it was not taken forward as part of the Exeter Local Plan.

2. Council position on the request and process

The Council confirms that a request for Local Green Space designation was made by the SLNA.

- Initial correspondence was submitted in September 2024.
- Further detail, including plans identifying the proposed LGS area, was received on 28 October 2024.

The Council therefore accepts that a request for designation was made. However, the Council's position is that the request was not considered as part of the Plan for the following reasons.

Policy and evidence requirements

National policy and guidance establish that Local Green Space designation is:

- Required to be consistent with the local planning of sustainable development and to complement investment in sufficient homes, jobs and other essential services (NPPF, paragraph 105).

The request to designate the County Hall grounds as a Local Green Space appears to have emerged in response to public consideration from the County Council (landowner) that part of the site, Matford Huts, was to be disposed of. This site has been included in the Exeter Plan as a residential allocation. Designation of the County Hall campus as a Local Green Space would therefore not complement the need for sufficient homes, an issue which the Exeter Plan is positively planning for.

- Discretionary ('whether to designate land is a matter for local discretion' – PPG, Open space, sports and recreation facilities, public rights of way and local green space, paragraph 13¹).

Given the recognised need for housing in the city, it is reasonable for the Council to exercise its discretion in this case and not include the County Hall grounds in the Exeter Plan as Local Green Space.

¹ Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/open-space-sports-and-recreation-facilities-public-rights-of-way-and-local-green-space>

- Subject to specific national criteria and a high level of protection, comparable to Green Belt.

The Council position is that the protection afforded to Local Green Space is of such strength that a fully considered and systematic approach would be more appropriate if it were to exercise its discretion and identify Local Green Space. Designation requires a structured and plan-wide assessment process, including:

- Robust evidence against national criteria;
- Consistent methodology across candidate sites;
- Engagement with landowners and relevant stakeholders; and
- Consultation and testing through the statutory plan-making process.

The Council considers that designation of an individual site would not be consistent with this systematic approach.

Implications for Plan strategy

Given the level of protection associated with Local Green Space designation, its application has the potential to constrain the use of land within the urban area.

National policy is clear that designation should not be used in a way that undermines the ability of a plan to meet development needs, including housing. In this context, introducing a designation at a late stage would risk undermining the Plan's spatial strategy and delivery objectives.

Timing within the Plan process

The detailed submission was received at an advanced stage in plan preparation, immediately prior to Regulation 19 publication (December 2024), when:

- The spatial strategy and site allocations had been finalised;
- The evidence base and consultation material had been prepared; and
- The Council was positively aiming to continue plan preparation in a changing national planning policy context before the publication of a new NPPF which had uncertain content and was being released at an unspecified time.

Given these uncertainties, the Council was of the view that progress on the Exeter Plan needed to continue at pace. Further evidence and drafting relating to a specific Local Green Space designation could have affected the ability of the Council to continue making timely progress for a much-needed Plan.

In addition, the issue of Local Green Space designation was not raised by the SLNA through earlier stages of consultation (Issues, Outline Draft or Full Draft) and therefore did not form part of the iterative process through which sites and policies were tested and refined.

The timing of the request appears to have followed external matters relating to the proposed disposal of the site by Devon County Council.

3. How the issue is addressed in the Plan

Although the County Hall grounds are not included as a Local Green Space in the Exeter Plan, the Plan does provide protection for open space, including the wider County Hall grounds, through Policy IF4.

This represents an enhancement in protection compared to the adopted Local Plan. The Local Plan First Review does not provide any designation to County Hall. It is not currently designated as open space. Through the evidence review for the Exeter Plan it became clear that this omission could be overcome through the designation of the wider grounds as open space under Policy IF4. This is shown on the Policies Map (CSD-04a)².

Additional protection is provided by the County Hall grounds' location in the St Leonard's Conservation Area³. The associated Conservation Area Appraisal identifies the important contribution that the grounds and trees make to the area (paragraphs 24.5 and 27.1⁴).

4. Summary

A request for Local Green Space designation for the County Hall grounds was made by the SLNA. However:

- Local Green Space designation is discretionary for local plans;
- Local Green Space designation requires a structured, evidence-based and plan-wide assessment in accordance with national policy;
- The suggested designation of the County Hall grounds appears to be in response to the emergence of a proposed allocation for much needed residential development;
- The request was submitted at a late stage – it was not made during previous consultations; and
- It was not possible or appropriate to undertake a wide-ranging, Local Green Space process within the Plan timetable immediately prior to publication given its discretionary status.

The Council has clearly communicated to the SLNA that an alternative route to Local Green Space designation is provided by the preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan for the area. If this were taken forward by the local community, the Council would support this process in accordance with its statutory duties.

² Available at:

https://exeter.gov.uk/media/r4yo3bc1/csd-04a_policies-map.pdf

³ Map available at:

<https://www.planning.data.gov.uk/map/?dataset=conservation-area&dataset=listed-building#50.72840339278554,-3.509414069756758,13.012382323712362z>

⁴ Available at:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B4CpCORtOQdTNjVPQWVRN054bnc?resourcekey=0-NaIYCabAo5eDNhWQVSnmGw>