

Conversations on Improving Health and Wellbeing in Newtown

*An inquiry into how to promote and develop a healthy, active neighbourhood
where all members of community feel able to participate*

1. Background

Karen Payne and David Hawkins [Wild Zones] were commissioned by Exeter City Council to help identify aspirations for Newtown Community on how to promote and develop a healthy, active neighbourhood where all members of the community feel-able to participate.

In December 2017 Sport England announced that Exeter/Cranbrook had been selected as one of 12 places in England to become a Local Delivery Pilot, a ground breaking initiative to create healthier, happier communities.... “We want to identify better ways to address stubborn inequalities and break down the barriers that stop people getting active... And we want to encourage wider, collaborative partnerships which look at how all parts of a community can better work together to help the most inactive.”

This report is based on conversations with residents and organizations active in Newtown, a review of documents regarding the Sport England Local Delivery Pilot, the Exeter City Council Strategy 2018-2021, and research on health inequalities. It is a contribution to understanding how the goals of the Sport England Local Delivery Pilot could best be achieved in Newtown and articulating the principles that Newtown residents have identified as priorities to guide future development of the Clifton Hill site.

Strategic Drivers as stated in the bid for the Sport England Local Delivery Pilot:

- Promoting active and healthy lifestyles
- Reducing health inequalities
- Tackling congestion and accessibility
- Building capacity in community and voluntary organizations

Listening methodologies

During September and October 2018, Wild Zones convened and facilitated 7 conversations with groups of Newtown residents; and engaged in conversations with Community Builders, community organisations and ECC Officers and Councillors. *[See Appendix 1 and 2 for details of conversations]*

2. Summary of Recommendations

Council: future approach

Provide clear and transparent communication by:

1. Communicating and listening proactively with residents to enable participation in decisions that affect their lives.
2. Using community conversations, focus groups, surveys and online tools to allow engagement in major decisions.
3. Publishing the results of community conversations and explaining how they will be taken into consideration.
4. Ensuring publically accessible information is available and communicated with communities to enable them to engage and discuss priorities with their elected Councillors.
5. Acknowledge communication from residents and community groups.

Enhance engagement with local communities by:

1. Working alongside communities to address challenges regarding infrastructure and safety, within available resources and constraints.
2. Encouraging community groups to research, develop and present plans for managing community assets and initiatives.
3. Enabling residents to take an active role in instigating and leading community activities.
4. Engaging communities in establishing and mobilising Exeter's vision for promoting active & healthy lifestyles.
5. Continuing to clarify the role of Wellbeing Exeter's Community Builders and Community Connectors and exploring building capacity and ensuring their ongoing effectiveness.
6. Engaging with the University & College to raise awareness on how students' behaviour affects vulnerable people and look at strategies to reduce the impact and perceptions of negative behaviour.

Improve mobility and transport by:

1. Encouraging Devon County Council the Transport Authority to assess safety of roads, car usage and shared use of busy pavements

Developing an asset based conversation by

1. Seeking input from a wide range of residents and communities on creating healthy, happy, active places to live.
2. Training staff to be sensitive to all issues that affect participation, including social, environmental and physical factors.
3. Establishing ongoing conversations with residents, communities and under-represented groups to generate creative ways to increase levels of activity.

Community Criteria for Clifton Hill

Consider the long term health, wellbeing and safety of residents and wildlife in decision making regarding urban infrastructure through:

Theme: Promoting Health & Wellbeing / Reducing health inequalities

- Provide opportunities for everyday physical activity and sport, including walking, play, cycling, running, dancing, skateboarding, etc.
- Protect and conserve open green space and wildlife habitats
- Promote community cohesion and emotional wellbeing through opportunities for social connection
- Include opportunities for culture and creativity
- Recognise and promote the crucial role of nature in the wellbeing of the community
- Encourage local residents to participate and take leadership in the development of their community and its resources

Theme: Sustainable Urban Planning

- Explore options for community managed green spaces with local stakeholders and residents

- Ensure indoor and outdoor public spaces are available for inclusive community use
- Recognise the contribution of the local environment to promote improved air quality and clean water
- Maintain bio-diversity by protecting wildlife habitat and corridors, trees and plant diversity
- Recognise the importance and value of diverse communities by ensuring a balance between long term and transient populations

3. Part One: Improving Health and Wellbeing in Newtown

Assets and challenges in Newtown

Residents often mention assets such as convenience to the city centre and local amenities, and their enjoyment of Newtown because of its diversity and community feel.

People are highly appreciative of Belmont Park, Belmont Hut, Clifton Hill Sports Centre and green space, the Respect Festival and other activities in the Park. Some people say that Newtown is quiet and that they feel safe living there.

Challenges include air pollution, litter; alcohol abuse; drug dealing and safety of pavements and street crossing (particularly for seniors and people with disabilities);

People also cite increasingly transient nature of the area, mainly because of student lets, as the cause of various problems. Some residents feel that too many vulnerable people with addiction issues are being housed in the area.

[See Appendix 3 for details on assets and challenges]

Barriers to participation

Many people need support to take even a small step towards breaking through their isolation or inactivity. Some people have hidden disabilities. Some people thrive on competition, but for others it triggers anxiety and shame.

Everyone needs to experience acceptance for their level of participation (or non-participation) in physical activities, whether in the context of sports, an exercise group, or at any event.

Some people feel isolated because they don't know their neighbours and no one facilitates social connection among residents.

Other social and emotional barriers to participation include not having anyone to go with, and not feeling welcome or wanted at events and activities.

Other barriers to participation that were frequently mentioned:

- lack of access to information about activities for people without internet
- lack of financial means to allow regular participation, even for people who have a strong desire
- unsafe pavements and road crossings
- lack of transport
- feeling unsafe on the street after dark
- feeling unsafe due to being surrounded by students

People were happy to share ideas for breaking down social isolation and encouraging/supporting greater activity:

- People suggested, "Invite people to join in, don't expect them to come just because they see a flyer. Offer to go with them, especially the first time".
- People who participated in a free weekly movement class in public parks (Free Movement) said they particularly appreciate this activity because it is free, sociable,

and more of a fun activity than exercise. They said it creates community and there is no commitment, no judgement. It's not competitive, not sporty and kids are welcome.

- People with severe mobility issues and other disabilities said they would like to join in activities such as Giant Game (for example, jigsaw puzzles, chess, four-in-a-row), croquet; karaoke, wheelchair disco, tasting healthy food, quizzes, stories, arts and crafts, and visits from therapy dogs. Some residents want to do fundraising to improve an outdoor area with shade.
- People living in over-55's accommodation enjoy a singing group, bingo, the annual Macmillan Coffee morning, local history walks, and activities with students who come once a week (bowls, skittles, quizzes, armchair fitness and going out for meal).

People want to feel that local government officials care about them and listen to their concerns. They want to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Opportunities for consultation and participation can have a powerful effect on health and wellbeing.¹ From the perspective of health inequalities it is vital to consult constituents about decisions that affect their lives, ensure people's participation in co-creating innovative solutions, and encourage them to take leadership and volunteer to implement these solutions.

The need for residents to take an active role in instigating and leading community activities

The challenge of recruiting more volunteers to fulfil roles previously performed by paid staff, is normally perceived as a necessity due to budget cuts.

But it can also be viewed as potent strategy for improving physical and mental health, strengthening the bonds among neighbours, promoting community cohesion, and reweaving the social fabric that is often frayed due to gentrification, and transient populations.

When we asked people to think creatively about encouraging volunteers to lead social and physical activities, the majority said this was too difficult, that all previous attempts had failed, and it was very unlikely to happen. However, we did identify very successful models of recruiting, training and supporting volunteers, for example Active Devon, Free Movement and Priory Park. [See *Recommendations*]

Barriers to conversations about some of the key issues

It was understood from the start that it is difficult to have conversations with many of the inactive section of the population that the Sport England Local Delivery Pilot is intended to impact. Isolated and inactive people are generally not confident enough to attend meetings or formulate and express strategies for changing their behaviour patterns or their neighbourhood. Many of them have seldom been in situations where they have been encouraged to do this. They may have low self-esteem or inadequate communication skills except in environments that already feel 'safe'.

¹ Michael Marmot provides this strikingly succinct summary of his findings on health inequality: "Autonomy – **how much control you have over your life** – and the **opportunities you have for full social engagement and participation** are crucial for health, well-being and longevity. It is inequality in these that plays a big part in producing the social gradient of health. Sounds simple, I hope. But those two sentences about control and participation took more than 25 years of research to formulate."

Some of Exeter's diverse communities who may be among the least active and engaged were not well-represented in the conversations we had. Due to scheduling difficulties, our conversation at the Mosque did not take place in the time frame of this consultation. However, the Trustees of the Mosque have agreed that they would like to hold a conversation for their community to discuss issues related to increased participation. There are other minority or marginalized groups who could also make a valuable contribution to the conversation.

In our largest conversations, very little attention was given to questions regarding ways that residents would like to contribute to volunteering to organise and lead events, or develop strategies for increasing activity among the least active. These conversations took place in a context of strong emotions and sense of urgency regarding the current situation of the Clifton Hill site.

Approximately 130 people participated in our conversations with parents during school drop off and pick-up at Newtown Primary School and at Community Conversation on 9th October. Despite our repeated attempts to follow the agenda, which included issues of community developing to increase levels of activity among the least active, the Community Conversation focussed almost entirely on Clifton Hill issues.

4. Recommendations

Given the focus on reducing health inequalities in the Sport England Pilot, we have taken into account the long-term research of Michael Marmot (Institute of Health Inequality, University of London) and Richard Wilkinson (Equality Institute, University of York), as well as other researchers on health inequality.

Thus, these recommendations include increasing opportunities for social participation and connection as a crucial step toward increasing physical activity among the least active.

[Recommendations for Devon County and Exeter City Council-driven initiatives are summarised at the beginning of this report.]

Community-driven Initiatives

Create situations that attempt to break through patterns of isolation and passivity

- Appoint 'greeters' at every event who will help people feel wanted and welcome, and invite them to come again
- Hold events in venues that feel safe to a particular group. For example, in their own places of residence, recreation facilities or places of worship. Liaise with Community Builders, managers of blocks of flats, and ECC staff to develop a plan to replace the role formerly played by wardens by recruiting and training volunteer 'Community Activators' and/or revising job descriptions for existing staff
- Recruit internet-savvy volunteers to assist isolated residents in learning about activities they may enjoy.

Convene a discussion about successful strategies for recruiting and training community leaders and volunteers to initiate and lead activities

- Invite Active Devon, Free Movement and others such as Community Builders who have been successful in catalysing and supporting volunteers to lead a wide range of activities.

- Devise a plan for increasing the number of residents who volunteer to initiate and lead social and physical activities in Newtown.
- After input from advisors and key stakeholders, take steps towards implementing a pilot training project
- Evaluate pilot to learn how to improve outcomes

5. Part Two: Development of Clifton Hill site

The issues, principles and recommendations below emerged from the specific suggestions made during our conversations with parents, children, teachers and trustees at Newtown Primary School (50+ participants), with the Head Teacher of Newtown Nursery School, and the Community Conversation with 80+ participants (9th October.)

Findings from conversations about Clifton Hill:

These findings are based on oral and written feedback that was offered frequently during our conversations that focused on the future of the Clifton Hill site

- People expect engagement and transparency regarding Council decisions that have a major impact on their lives.
- There is emerging interest in the community coming together as active participants in the enhancement and stewardship of Clifton Hill green space for the benefit of all.
- People expressed concern about Newtown being surrounded by streets with heavy traffic. Several of Newtown's heavily-populated streets have no trees, and many others have very few trees. Many residents have no garden.
- There is a high level of awareness about the role of trees and green space in ameliorating the harmful effects of pollution due to traffic on major roads surrounding Newtown – in particular the danger posed to children and the elderly.
- There is widespread concern that the loss of access to 'natural' and biodiverse open space is detrimental to physical and mental health.
- People based their concerns on scientific research as well as their personal experiences of the benefits of nature for fresh air, nourishment of the senses, peace of mind, sense of wonder, comfort in sorrow, relief from stress and the joy of connection with other species.
- There is a sense of urgency that decisions by the Council should take into account the fact that biodiverse natural systems develop over very long periods of time and that lost green space and biodiversity will not be regained.
- Community cohesion and cultural diversity are highly valued. People want to live in a community where they can encounter people in a wide range of activities and settings.
- Many people saw the Sports Centre and green space as assets that improved community cohesion by significantly increasing opportunities for neighbours and families to meet for social and physical activities.
- Children asked for a 'natural' play space (i.e., not constructed by adults) with trees, logs, boulders and rocks that they can use for creating their own play environments that include climbing, balancing, rolling in leaves, making dens, playing in mud, using natural materials to make things, and just being around nature and wildlife.
- Parents, teachers and other adults also want a space where children can play in a natural environment, as well as a place for walking in nature, informal and guided wildlife spotting, picnics in a natural environment, and a sheltered area to meet and play on rainy days.

6. Recommendations

Below are our recommendations based on the results of conversations with Newtown residents, and review of the ECC Strategy 2018-21.

Recommendations for Community-Driven Initiatives

1. Conduct research on options for community-managed green space in consultation with major stakeholders including Newtown Primary School, Newtown Nursery School, Save Clifton Hill Green Space and Devon Wildlife Trust.
2. Consider existing examples such as Exeter City Parks, Priory Park/Persimmons Housing, and other models of community engagement in stewardship of public/private open spaces.
3. Consider existing models of recruiting and training volunteers. For example, Free Moovement's Community Activator training programme could also be adapted for volunteers who are passionate about stewardship of green space, such as play rangers or organising and leading activities related to biodiversity (such as bird watching or enhancement and preservation wildlife habitat).
4. Develop a plan for a community-managed Green Space that will include protection of wildlife habitat and corridors, a nature play area, and areas for other community activities.
5. Research models of community-based multi-use social spaces and evidence of how these places can improve health and well-being.
6. Research potential funding sources for the above. Reducing health inequality by improving social connection and participation is a significant concern of major public and private funders. Many funders also have grave concerns around obesity, aging population, mental health, environmental quality, addictions, and other social and health issues.

Looking to the Future

The city of Exeter has a complex and well-researched vision for health and wellbeing. To some extent there is already an engaged citizenry in Newtown, and there are many possibilities for mobilizing increased engagement in Exeter's vision for health and wellbeing.