



## **Awards for Planning Excellence Case Study**

### **Park Life Heavitree Entered by Avalon Planning & Heritage**

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## **1. Project Background**

Park Life Heavitree is a community charity based in and around Heavitree Pleasure Ground, Exeter. They are recent winners of The Pride of Exeter Community Group of the Year and The Prince of Wales Award for Community Work at the Devon County Show. The charity has 8 trustees and over 50 volunteers working to reduce social isolation, increase participation in healthy lifestyles, build a sustainable community and help local people to take an active role in their area.

Park Life believe that the park acts as a 'community glue' and aims to build community and bring about social change through a range of facilities, activities and services. They run events every 5 weeks in the park such as Pop-up cafes, Mothers day events, The Big Lunch and the very popular Heavitree Bank Holiday Fun Day in September. On offer are informal services such as providing meals for new parents or helping elderly people to get to the park. Park Life have helped coordinate various organisations alongside the city council to improve various facilities in the park. These include working with the Lawn Tennis Association, Tennis For Free, PING! Table tennis and the Love Local food van.

Park Life Heavitree are committed to building a community in and around Heavitree Pleasure Ground. Their ambition, since 2010 was to build a community café and hub to expand the range of activities and services on offer as well as help Park Life to meet its aims.

The Planning Director of Avalon Planning & Heritage offered up his services on a pro-bono basis in 2016 to assist the charity with the delivery of their ambitions for a new community hub and café within Heavitree Pleasure Ground. At the point of instruction, the charity had commenced initial consultation with local residents and community groups to facilitate a scoping and design exercise which would immediately inform the purpose and function of the new building.

Avalon's involvement stretched from the facilitation of an architecture competition, managing pre-application engagement with Exeter City Council including the asset management team and the eventual submission of the planning application. For Park Life, it was important for them to deliver a new community based facility that would successfully open the park to more users and isolated individuals. Having community buy-in with the proposals from an early stage was also an important part of their brief to Avalon so community and third party engagement formed an essential element of the planning exercise.

[www.parklifeheavitree.org.uk](http://www.parklifeheavitree.org.uk)

## **2. Outcomes for People and Communities**

The primary aims of the Parklife charity is to reduce social isolation, increase participation in healthy lifestyles, build a sustainable community and help local people to take an active role in their area. Park Life believe that the park acts as a 'community glue' and aims to build community and bring about social change through a range of facilities, activities and services.

The core values of the charity were made extremely purposeful during the Pandemic, when a number of members and groups of the community found themselves isolated resulting in risks to mental health and social wellbeing.

It was during the pandemic that the community hub was being constructed, with its eventual completion in the summer of 2021, just as the COVID19 regulations were beginning to be relaxed.

The charity were particularly active during the Pandemic, ensuring that particular individuals in the community did not find themselves isolated. By making regular contact throughout the community and holding weekly COVID compliant events/meetings in the park, Parklife were able to reach those individuals considered most at risk, including single parents, those with disabilities, elderly residents and those with particular mental health needs.

Since the completion of the Parklife community hub in the summer of 2021, the charity has been able to host a number of community events to welcome local residents. This has demonstrated to be a great success with previously isolated individuals now making regular use of the café as an ad hoc meeting place, significantly improving their mental health and wellbeing.

The cafe itself injects any profits back into the charity for organising events within the park and local community. The café/community hub is mostly voluntarily run which itself assists in providing those previously isolated members of the community with a sense of purpose and empowerment. The café/community hub does however provide 2/3 salaried jobs and also supports local food and drink producers in the Exeter and Devon area.

During the initial public engagement phase, concerns were raised by the local business community that the new café and community hub would draw foot-fall away from the local High Street. The new facility has however been beneficial to the local economy by drawing residents into the park and also the local High Street. Indeed, local residents will often visit local shops and amenities whilst on their regular walks and visits to the café/community hub.

Community groups, social clubs and sports groups are able to make use of the community hub at affordable prices, enabling such groups to remain financially viable whilst supporting the future success of this new facility.

### **3. Planning Contribution**

Avalon's role was primarily to lead and advise the multi-disciplinary team and Trustees from inception through to the delivery of a successful planning permission. With our expertise in the local planning framework and political make-up, we were able to successfully advise the team of volunteers and architect through initial pre-application engagement. Following which, we were instructed to assemble a multi-disciplinary team to prepare a planning application.

A number of complexities were met along the way, including the need to engage with local users of a self-made bmx track to ensure the facility could be reprovided within the park. Additionally, it was necessary to engage with other users of the park, including a neighbouring bowls club, tennis club and young families.

Avalon took on the role of managing the design team and multi disciplinary team inputs to inform the planning application. This included the need to address contentious matters such as vehicle parking and access, the removal of trees and surface water drainage.

Pre-submission, we also took it upon ourselves to engage with third party bodies such as Sport England, the Lawn Tennis Association and the City Council's Asset Management team. This process proved valuable when the eventual submission was made and deliberated.

Working in partnership with Exeter City Council planning officers, Councillors and asset management team, we were able to collectively advise both Parklife Heavitree together with the City Council on how this fantastic community based facility can deliver all round social and economic benefits in this important and growing area of City.

### **4. Outcomes for climate action**

The new community hub and café was designed with a fabric-first approach in mind and to BREEAM Excellent standards.

The building has been designed with a highly insulated timber-frame construction used in conjunction with a timber roof. It is highly energy efficient and naturally ventilated to minimise energy use. Daylight

is plentiful but controlled and serves not only to naturally light the spaces but to animate and characterise them; with sunlight entering from several sides, the spaces are full of warm light and will change during the day. Solar gain is controlled by strategic use of louvers whilst still allowing south-light to penetrate. Indirect north light is used to illuminate the hall where varied uses may require careful control of lighting conditions.

Importantly, the siting and location of the new community hub and café is crucial to reducing the need to travel by car and thereby reducing carbon emissions. Indeed, with the new hub and café being located within the park it encourages residents to walk or cycle locally thereby also promoting healthy travel. As part of the planning application we also sought to engage with local the local car sharing company, Co Cars and Co Bikes to secure a dedicated parking space on the street for a car-sharing space.

## **5. Outcomes for sustainable development**

Goal 3 (Good Health and Well Being) – The new community hub/café promotes a healthy lifestyle by engaging individuals and groups in the park. The new space and the operation of the charity reaches out to isolated individuals in the community to reduce isolation.

Goal 4 (Quality Education) – The new community hub provides an affordable space available to local groups and societies including pre-school groups, nurseries, scout groups and school visits.

Goal 5 (Gender Equality) – The introduction of the new community hub and café in the park has encouraged female users to make more use of the park and wider space. By introducing the facility, it has increased natural surveillance, making the park feel safer for all users.

Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) – The open access of the new community hub helps to reduce any perceived inequalities in the community.

Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) – The introduction of the new community hub helps to make the local community more inclusive. Indeed, its location also contributes greatly to the local vibrancy.

Goal 13 (Climate Action) – The siting and location reduces the need to travel by car. The building has been developed to a high energy efficient standard and with a fabric first approach.

## **6. Community Engagement**

Positive engagement was sought with the local community. Since 2011, Park Life Heavitree worked with local people and park users to explore the idea of a cafe and community facility in the pleasure ground. Initially the charity saw this as the best way to fulfil Park Life's aims but as they started to consult the community it was clear that people wanted:

1. Somewhere to purchase locally sourced, quality refreshments in the park
2. A place to meet people and make connections - somewhere to act as a community hub in Heavitree
3. A hireable space for activities such as fitness classes and children's parties
4. Improved toilet facilities in the park

Park Life Heavitree has come to this conclusion, since starting the project in 2011, by consulting with park users and local people in a number of informal and formal ways. The initial survey saw 1000 paper questionnaires distributed to local households. 177 homes returned the forms and 90% said they supported the idea and would use a cafe facility in the park. 68% of these people would use it on a weekly basis and 31% daily.

A full feasibility study was carried out and extensive consultation took place including:

- Focus group meetings with user groups e.g. teenagers, young parents etc;
- 2000 household survey and online questionnaire about how the facility could be used (70.3% of the 218 completed strongly agreed with the idea of the facility and 21.3% agreed);
- 2 Spaceshaper workshops with a public space designer;
- Formal consultation events in the Scout Hut and Park;
- On-going informal consultation at monthly Park Life events;
- Updates on web and social media;
- The formation of a 10 strong Park Life Building Team made up of local people, giving time, energy and skills to make the dream a reality. Including a project manager, QS, Structural engineer, Planning Consultant, Business Manager, Construction Manager and Local Government land and property manager

Park Life Heavitree has developed a good working relationship with a wide variety of organisations through our activities and services - these include: Ladysmith, St. Michael's, Whipton Barton, Ellen Tinkham, St. Luke's and St. Peter's schools. Tennis For Free, The Lawn Tennis Association, Active Devon, South West Volleyball, Exeter City Football in the Community, Heavitree Bowls Club, Exeter Basketball Academy, 2nd Exeter Scouts, Exeter Chiefs, Heavitree Running club and a number of fitness classes all linked to sport and leisure. Age UK Heavitree Health Centre and Westbank Health and Well Being centre. Exeter City Council and Exeter Green Partnership. Park Life has also enjoyed support from significant public figures, such as Lady Arran and Tony Hawks.

The above engagement strategy was developed amongst the team and has been successful in reaching as many members of the community as possible, particularly vulnerable groups and isolated individuals. Every contribution assisted in the delivery of the new community hub and café.

## **7. Leading Practice**

The Parklife Heavitree project was enabled through the endless hard work of the charity's fundraising team. The project was entirely funded through public donations, grants, volunteers donating their time and funding from the local City and County Council and third party institutional grant funding.

In doing so, it was imperative that the planning application was submitted on time and determined within the statutory timeframes. Fortunately, having been through a detailed and valuable engagement process with the City Council and statutory third parties, we were able to draw upon those initial inputs to feed into the design and operation of the site. Additionally, given the pre-submission public consultation, the design team managed to demonstrate how the scheme had addressed those concerns of local residents, such as the replacement of the BMX track, providing safe and level access together with lighting and pollution.

The planning submission and determination certainly managed to complete within the project timeframes, thereby enabling the charity to access various streams of funding to support the construction phase. Unfortunately, the development itself however was hampered by the Pandemic together with the access to materials and labour. However, eventually the new facility did open in the summer of 2021.

A key complexity of this scheme stood out to be achieving planning permission for the loss of designated Open Space and on land owned by the City Council. By engaging early with the City Council's Asset Management team, the charity were able to agree to favourable terms and their support throughout the planning process was crucial.

In seeking to overcome the in principle loss of the designated Open Space, it was necessary to clearly articulate the significant value the new facility would bring to the local community, by delivering on the core aims of the charity. The Council Officers recognised this and found on balance that the loss of the relatively small area of park would be outweighed by the delivery of this inclusive community space.

By using an innovative engagement methodology with the City Council and third parties, we were able to obtain buy-in from an early stage and thereby avoiding a prolonged planning process and any further delays to achieving access to grant funding for the charity.

Please note that this case study has been taken from their entry form and so RTPI does not take responsibility for accuracy of contents. Readers are encouraged to undertake further research into the project which is likely to have developed since the time that this entry was written.