

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile Newtown & St Leonards 2023-24



Introduction

Welcome to Newtown & St Leonards! This neighbourhood profile draws on the work of the Wellbeing Exeter Community Builder to bring you a community's eye view of the neighbourhood and what happens in it. You'll not find statistics here on demographics, health, education, etc. Please read this alongside the [Joint Strategic Needs Assessment](#) tool from Devon County Council, which provides a wealth of quantitative data.

Our focus here is on local knowledge: what is it like to live here; what informal community activity there is; where the important community focal points are; and what's missing, or of concern to local residents.

This is a snapshot rather than a directory, so may not have exhaustive listings (although we've done our best to avoid errors and omissions). It aims to highlight community strengths and areas for growth. It also aims to provide an informed commentary on the health of community life.



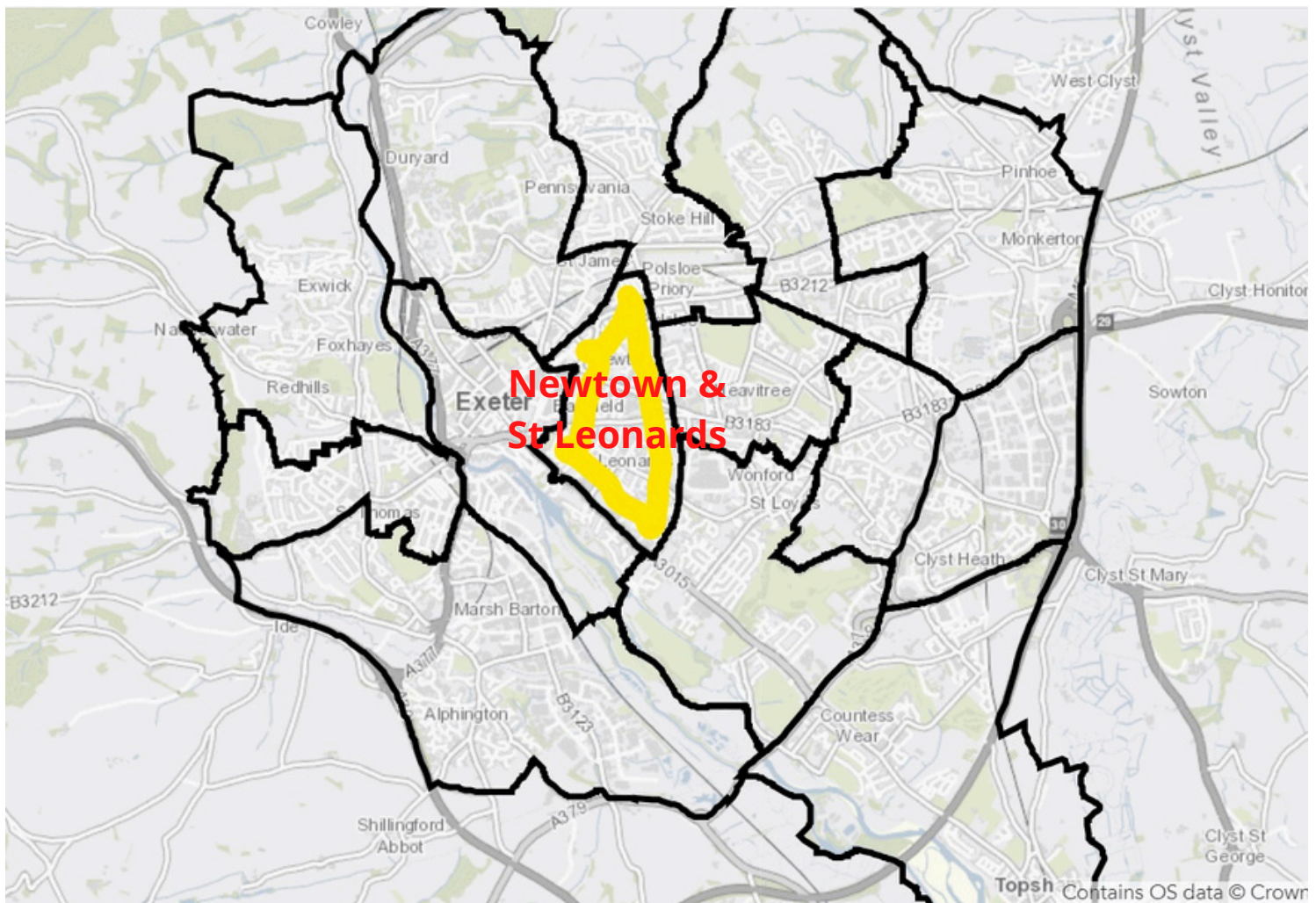
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Picture Of A Place

Newtown and St Leonards may be one relatively small ward, but these two areas are very distinct communities, with Heavitree Road, an arterial route leading from the city centre towards the hospital and beyond, acting as the boundary between the two.

Newtown is a mixed, city centre community. It is valued as a diverse, multicultural area, attracting a number of musicians and artists (there is even a Sikh temple in a house in Clifton Street). Although Newtown is classed as an area of deprivation, there are also many professionals living here. People value the area's convenience to the city centre and local amenities, whilst retaining the community feel of a 'village in the city' – a safe and quiet place to live.



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St Leonards is generally more affluent, but there is the same strong community feel, and often residents refer to it as 'the village'. Many non-residents work nearby, or come to St Leonards to shop or meet friends. The row of independent shops on Magdalen Road is a magnet for people from across the city.

Newtown Primary School is described by parents as having a village feel. St Leonards Primary School is much larger and equally valued. Both schools have active PTAs with regular events, including those where the community are welcome to attend. St Leonards Preschool is temporarily moving to Palace Gate whilst development takes place on the old Royal Academy for Deaf Education site. There are also a number of private nurseries and independent schools in the area. The independent schools also engage with the local community. Newtown School is run by ACE academy, which is trying to connect with the community by visiting care homes to sing for them or help the community gardening groups with the help of the Community Builder.

There are a number of sheltered and supported housing complexes, managed by a number of organisations including Guinness Trust, Exeter Homes Trust, Westward Housing, Exeter City Council and Cornerstone. Some residents within sheltered accommodation complexes comment that they do not know their neighbours as well as they'd like to. Some of the older people's accommodation has communal rooms that aren't used to their full potential. At Eaton House, residents are raising funds for outdoor furniture to encourage residents to come outside and interact.

Churches in the area include St Leonard's Church and St Matthew's Church in Newtown (both Church of England). Other churches include Belmont Chapel and Christ Church in Newtown, Jehovah's Witness Hall and Church of the Latter-Day Saints in St Leonard's, as well as 'free' churches which meet at school halls etc. Some of the churches provide community space and a number of groups for both church-goers and the wider community. St Matthew's Church has recently undergone a transition and a new team from London has been put in place led by Rev. Ed Hodges. The church pews have been replaced with chairs, there are television screens around the church and music is performed by a live band. Efforts have resulted in a larger all-age congregation. The Church has baby and toddler groups. Belmont Chapel runs many support groups including Lunch Together, social cafes and young adult groups.

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Green Spaces

Belmont Park is one of the main parks in the city and is a very important asset in Newtown. The community centre is discussed below. It has two play areas including a fenced-off green space for children to play safely; table tennis table; small basketball court; outdoor exercise equipment and a graffiti wall (which can be used for ball games).



The park is used by people from all walks of life and people can be seen walking dogs; playing football and other sports; playing instruments; having a picnic and just relaxing. Ethnic minority and religious groups regularly meet up for picnics. There are raised beds next to the hut where people can plant herbs, and there is a sensory garden. Trees are often used to support exercise equipment, slack lines and a rope swing. New equipment has been installed in the park through the work of the Friends of Belmont Park and funding from the City Council, and further plans exist, but have stalled recently. The park is well-used by local and Exeter-wide organisations for gatherings and events, including the annual Respect Festival.

Freemovement, a free, volunteer-led, exercise group for all ages and abilities and held all year round, runs sessions here. Belmont Bowling Green is adjacent to the Park and as well as regular bowls offers a weekly group for people with disabilities.

Merry Go Round Toy Library shares a building with the Exeter Scrapstore within the park. The well-established toy library offers a low-cost toy loaning service for families with babies to children in their early teens. The **Exeter Scrapstore** provides new art and craft materials and reclaimed and recycled materials for craft, educational and play purposes. Both the toy library and the scrapstore are well-supported by local residents and those further afield.

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Dog faeces, litter, drug taking and anti-social behaviour, the latter particularly in the sensory garden, are seen as issues. The City Council in response to local concern and in partnership with the Friends of Belmont Park has lowered hedges resulting in a more visible open space. Police patrols have also been stepped up, but concerns about drug use persist. A few people have commented on the lack of lighting. Lack of toilet facilities is often raised but the issues they bring are also acknowledged. Tree felling in the park and the area continues to be an emotive issue with concern around trees next to the ambulance station being debated by local residents on social media.

Some would like to see somewhere to buy refreshments after school. Others have mentioned the Play Rangers that used to work in the park and how they would love to see them return. Some of the dog walkers would like to find ways to accommodate dogs at social café events.

Behind the recently closed Clifton Hill Sports Centre is the 8-acre Clifton Hill Green Space twice the size of Belmont Park. This is well-used by residents for dog-walking, exercise, and connecting with nature. The proposed development of the former Clifton Hill Sports Centre for housing has met with considerable concern from residents, unhappy about the loss of local facilities, and the lack of consultation. This frustration was a factor in an independent councillor being elected for the ward in 2019, which, anecdotally, has helped influence decisions about the green space here. Current plans, to commence in 2022, involve retaining the ski slope and driving range, at least for the time being, and a 'green corridor' to link with the park.

Bull Meadow Park has had new play equipment installed recently, led by local residents. Residents also held a planting session and installed a nature trail. The park has picnic benches and an area for ball games and other activities. A gymnastics centre is located within the park, offering classes and training from pre-school to adults, as well as hosting a martial arts and a dance group.



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A part of the park has been fenced off due to a damaged drainage system since 2019. A campaign group was formed to object to plans (subsequently rejected) for a slice of the park to be taken for a turning circle for a new almshouses development. The Exeter Dissenters Graveyard Trust look after a small graveyard next to the park.

Mount Radford Lawn was part of the Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education and used by local schools. Developers are interested in building houses on the land. St Leonard's Neighbourhood Association has successfully listed the Mount Radford Lawn as an asset of community value despite an appeal by the school. According to the association, Erade Trustees have informed them that they intend to hold onto the land for at least another five years or more to try for development value again.

Interest in the environment and green spaces in the area has led to several ideas for small-scale gardening and environmental projects.

Codrington Street residents, initially connected by the Community Builder, in collaboration with the city council and Devon Wildlife Trust have come together to plant window boxes and scatter wildflower seeds in the Triangle Car Park. They plan to widen activities including the teaching of traditional skills such as hedge laying.

Residents of Gras Lawn and Wellingtonia Park have held outdoor events to bring neighbours together.

Several other groups have undertaken work to 'reclaim' areas that have been neglected, improve safety and reduce antisocial behaviour, and bring people together.

There is a green space by Clifton Street car park called Hawthorn Haven, run by residents who got funds from Devon Wildlife Trust. With support from the Community Builder, they planted up the area with shrubs and plants and they also use the space for regular community get togethers as a monthly social cafe.

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Community Hubs and What Happens In Them

Community hubs can be buildings, spaces, organisations, even people. They can be community-owned and run, council property, and commercial businesses. What they have in common is that they bring added value to the activities and energy associated with them by bringing people together in ways they might not otherwise do, being a focus for local expertise and connection, and facilitating the casual encounters that fuel fantastic community action.

Both Newtown and St Leonards have Community Associations.

Newtown Community Association (NCA) manages the community centre in Belmont Park. It can be rented at a low cost and is very well used. Activities include Woodcraft Folk, yoga, a choir, pilates, tango, and cultural groups, including the Newtown Roots Band. The NCA holds an annual Winter Warmer social event and has a number of groups under its umbrella including twice weekly Qigong, a monthly social café and a weekly choir.

The St Leonards Neighbourhood Association (SLNA) runs a popular Christmas Fair on Magdalen Road. It has worked with the St Leonards Primary School organising inter-generational events. They were also part of the collaboration (along with Wellbeing Exeter, RD&E, and local surgery PPGs) that hosted St Leonard's Wellfest in 2019.

Belmont Chapel runs a wide range of groups and activities for people of all ages, many, but not all with a faith-based theme. There are groups for pre-school children, a memory café, older people's social group, a Solihull parenting course, English as an additional language classes, and an 'information café' with creche for women from across the world.

St Leonard's Church holds weekly toddler groups with a separate dads' group, and children's ballet classes are also held here.

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St Leonard's School has pre-pandemic hosted the Exeter Junior Orchestra, as well as a couch to 5k, open to all, from the school gates, and a samba drumming band.

St Matthews Church Hall is well used by the church itself, and dance groups and classes. There is also a pilates group and a guide company that use the hall.

St Sidwell Community Centre, whilst just outside the area, is well used by residents within the ward. It has a range of external groups using its facilities as well as having its own events and workshops such as bread making, preserving and a community garden. It now has its own bakery in premises nearby.

The Coaver Club, based in St Leonard's within the Devon County Council grounds, is open to nearby residents and employees of DCC, it has a number of sports and social activities.

Local pubs The Clifton Inn in Newtown and The Mount Radford in St Leonards host music events, quizzes and sports teams. In response to the pandemic, many of the local pubs and cafes offered take-away food or deliveries. The Clifton Inn now has a food van selling to local building sites etc. Ebdons Café and The Bowling Green pub both ran online quizzes during lockdown.

What Else Is Happening?

St Sidwell's Point, the new leisure centre and swimming pool complex to replace the Pyramids Centre, opened in April 2022.

Clifton Hill remains the home for **Exeter Ski Club** offering skiing for all ages and abilities including a group for people with disabilities) and a golf driving range.



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St Lukes Sports Centre (at the School of Education) offers timetabled classes, a gym and a swimming pool which are all open to the public. The sports hall can be hired by the public off-peak.

Victoria Park Tennis & Bridge Club also hosts a folk music club.

Exeter School hosts ISCA Hockey, Exeter Storm Volleyball, Exeter Korfball and Exeter Company of Archers.

Maynard School hosts a zumba group and a badminton group.

Informal Middle Aged Man men's football meet up occasionally in Belmont Park.

Many of the sheltered accommodation complexes host resident-led activities including coffee mornings, quizzes, cards, Tai Chi and bingo. Eaton House residents save their coffee morning contributions and enjoy trips or meals out. Exeter University students run term-time activities at Eaton House and Faraday House. ECC properties have regular sing-alongs with the Goldies organisation and occasional visits from the museum and other organisations. The Community Builder has connected Newtown Roots Band with Eaton House; supported residents with a games evening at Faraday House and a resident to help with a digital drop in at another accommodation. Residents from Eaton House regularly attend Goldies sessions at Faraday House.

Patient Participation Groups are held at Barnfield Hill Surgery and St Leonard's Surgery. In normal times the groups regularly hold talks and events for the wider community. Barnfield Hill Surgery has a patient garden and encourages patients to get involved.

Community Builder community engagement events have included a Halloween party, quiz session, potluck meal, social café and baby and toddler singalong and a community conversations café with Community Builders from neighbouring wards.

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Following events in Heavitree and Digby, the university astrophysics team offered to bring the Star Gazing event to another area. The Community Builders for Newtown & St Leonard's and Mount Pleasant helped coordinate the event. Over 150 people attended.

A poetry group was set up by a resident and another resident set up a book club.

Belmont Table Tennis Club runs every Wednesday from 11am-12pm just outside the Newtown Community Association. The group was started by a previous CPAO to get people using the space to play table tennis.

Spreading The Word: How Do People Connect?

Both Newtown and St Leonard's Community Associations have websites and the NCA has a social media presence. The community builder shares some of the SLNA and NCA news and activities within her newsletter. The SLNA has a noticeboard on Magdalen Road and produces a newsletter that is distributed by over 50 volunteers to over 3,000 households on a bi-monthly basis. The SLNA has a page on its website with a list of local groups and activities, provided by the community builder, as well as a virtual noticeboard.

Local park groups, St Leonard's Practice, Exeter Housing Services and Newtown Community Association, among others, have a Facebook presence. The Newtown & St Leonards Community Facebook Group has a large following and is a useful place to find out what's happening locally and to share information.

St Leonard's Primary School, Newtown Primary School, St Leonard's Preschool and Newtown Community Preschool have newsletters, websites and Facebook Pages for parents.

There is capacity to display posters in some of the supported housing complexes in the area, local GP Surgeries as well as shop, resident and office windows.

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The Community Builder uses social media to connect with residents and finds this an effective way to share information. Writing articles for the St Leonard's Newsletter is another way the Community Builder connects with local residents.

Two noticeboards have been installed, one by residents of Wellingtonia Park within the Fleming Way play area and one led by a Newtown resident with support from the Newtown Community Association, which is situated at the Blackboy Road entrance to Belmont Park.



A resident was keen to have a noticeboard in Newtown opposite the general store but struggled to find local support so hasn't pursued it.

The Job Centre has offered noticeboard and table space for community information of interest to their clients.

Where Are The Gaps an Concerns? What Potential For The Future?

In Newtown, residents are mainly concerned with litter; drugs, drinking and the increasingly transient nature of the area through rentals and student accommodation. Some people feel overwhelmed by the number of students in the area, and have complained of their noise and antisocial behaviour. However, other views of students are as an asset to the community. The Community Builder has supported the University in listening to residents' concerns and ideas on ways that students can be involved in their community, to everyone's benefit.

In St Leonard's, particularly streets nearer to the city centre, residents were also concerned about litter, students and drug taking. St Leonard's residents very often cite the lack of a community hall as a concern for the area with the recent sale of the Roberts Road hall seen as a real loss to the community. The potential loss of green space has caused much controversy.

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The main desire, apart from to secure the area's much-valued green space, is to improve information flows. Often this is to do with using existing space, facilities and enthusiasm more efficiently, to everyone's benefit. With the ward being situated so close to the city centre there are already a lot of activities to get involved with and some clubs and groups struggle to attract enough members and/or volunteers.

Given the number of people who claim they do not know enough about what is happening locally, we need to consider how key local organisations and city-wide organisations can assist in sharing details of clubs and organisations and increase awareness of local opportunities for volunteering. For example, several of the supported housing establishments are keen for local groups to come in and use their space for free, which can help keep overheads down for organisations and a new potential source of members, and provide opportunities for residents to experience new activities.

