

# Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

## St David's 2023-24



### Introduction

Welcome to St David's! This neighbourhood profile draws on the work of the Wellbeing Exeter Community Builder in St David's, 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 are the important community focal points; what's missing, or of concern to local residents.

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



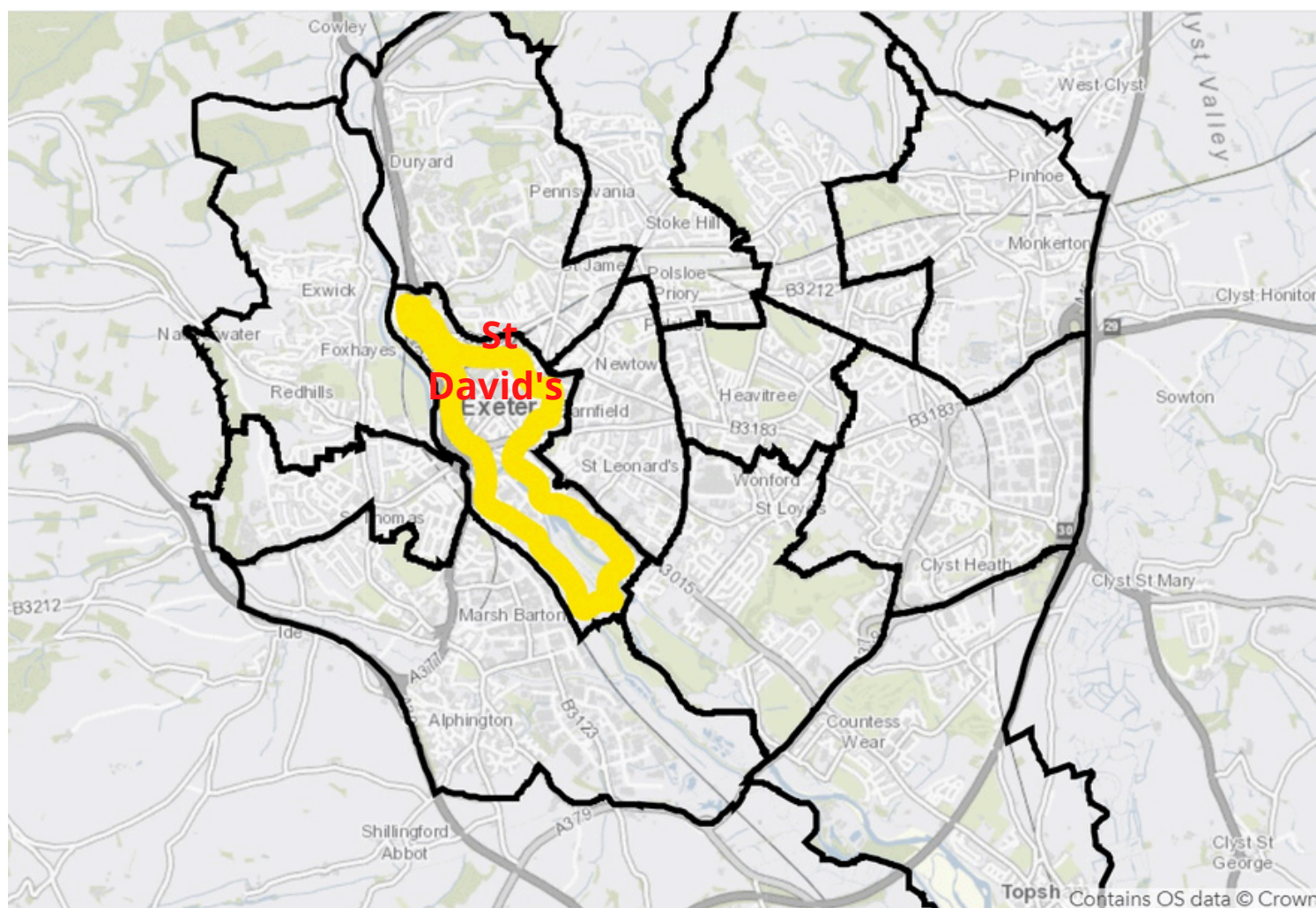
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### Picture Of A Place

The ward of St David's extends from the mainline railway station in the west, across the Exe Bridges intersection and eastwards along the river, as well as reaching northwards into the city centre. Because of the road layout, the position of the river, and the type of development in this area, it does not make sense to consider this a single community. The western part of the ward, near the station and the Iron Bridge, forms a well-established community.

The Community Builder originally was focused on more recently developed areas around Exe Bridges, and the lower reaches of Fore Street and South Street, moving down to the Quay and up to the canal basin. These areas were deemed to have the most needs, economic deprivation and less connection. This, however, changed during the first Covid lockdown, due to the need across the whole ward, and continued after.



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The area is characterised by housing complexes rather than traditional residential streets. Some of these are purpose-built student accommodation, but others are housing association properties or supported accommodation for vulnerable groups such as homeless young people, older people, or those in recovery (some examples are Julian House, Gabriel House, and Bethany House). Many of these buildings are three or four stories high, and often built around enclosed courtyards or green spaces only accessible to residents. This makes for a very distinctive pattern of local neighborhood interaction, with a series of micro-communities existing side-by-side: in some complexes the courtyard format has helped foster community interaction, but in other levels of transience have meant this is more of a challenge.

Working with residents of supported accommodation at Shilhay revealed a desire to bring the community closer together, stay in touch and share information and opportunities to get together. To make this happen one resident has taken it upon herself to do a Shilhay newsletter which is now on its tenth edition. In the newsletter, which is well received, she shares contact information for numerous services, any updates, groups and activities. The resident also set up a WhatsApp group for residents which, throughout Covid, proved invaluable in supporting each other with keeping up morale, shopping and collecting prescriptions. The residents also used it to monitor, keep track of and support each other through awful social behaviour issues. The residents worked with Exeter City Council to get community noticeboards placed in each court so that those residents not accessing WhatsApp could still receive updates and information, as well as the newsletter. These stronger connections have led to the residents coming together and, with the Community Builder's support, implemented a community coffee morning, Tai Chi classes and, more recently, a weekly craft group.

Gabriel House residents had worked with the previous Community Physical Activity Organizer (CPAO) to access activities and events within the wider community. This was successful in that it helped the residents to integrate and gain confidence in being a part of the wider community. This in turn led to some of them to set up DBN Community Cafe, open to all residents. The cafe is based in St David's Church but has been so successful that they are looking for a bigger venue, and are now being supported by the Community Builder and current CPAO.

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Some of the social housing communities have their own WhatsApp groups and newsletters, such as LiveWest and Cornerstone, which have helped to engage and support residents. Unfortunately, most of these communities do not have community rooms, making coming together for events and activities harder. This has been overcome with Shilhay opening their groups to residents outside of their community, which has worked well in bringing younger residents together with the Shilhay older residents and with the sharing of skills and knowledge to the group.

There are no doctors surgeries or schools in St David's East (there is primary school in the western part of the ward), and no leisure centres, although Riverside is just over the ward boundary in St Thomas. Perhaps as a result, residents do travel outside their immediate neighbourhood for everyday facilities, either west to St Thomas, or north into Newtown & St Leonard's.

The area is also home to the charity St Petrock's, which provides support and food for rough sleepers. This has led to continual issues with anti-social behaviour around the city centre, South Street and Fore Street. To help tackle these issues, local stakeholders applied for and used the Devon & Cornwall Police Commissioner's funding in 2020 and 2024.

Many of the seven churches within this southern part of the city centre also provide support for homeless people, as does The Salvation Army, based in Friars Gate.



The dynamics of who does what and where is affected by the fact that this is firmly a city centre location.

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St David's includes the area around the Quay, which has an array of shops, offices, restaurants and nightclubs, as well as outdoor activity facilities such as a climbing centre, bike hire and watersports equipment rental. Organised bike rides and walks run from here, as does the Riverside Park Run, which attracts over 500 runners weekly.

It is an area popular with visitors; prior to the pandemic, many local people said they did not regularly visit, despite it being on their doorstep, as it did not feel like 'their' space, especially in the summer when it attracts lots of tourists. The lockdown, with its restriction on how far people could travel from home, made the Quay area much quieter, and allowed many locals to reconnect with it, encouraging some to want to do more to improve its anti-social behaviour problems. Through the Devon & Cornwall Commissioners 2020 fund, some of the communities around this area linked with the Police Neighbourhood Watch Scheme.

There are plans to develop brownfield areas around the Canal Basin, Water Lane, and the Haven Road parking site behind Clip n Climb. These will provide more housing, however this has caused some contention with the residents due to the amount and heights proposed. The residents have come together and developed a Haven Banks Support Group to oppose the developments, and a separate Residents Association. They are writing a Community Plan, which will bring together the wider community and encompass the assets, strengths, needs and diversity of the ward.

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### Green Spaces

Haven Banks play area has recently been upgraded and attracts families from across the city due to its proximity to the quay, leisure centre and shopping facilities. This is a busy and well utilised area that has green spaces adjacent to it and a local resident has dug and sowed wildflower seeds.



Belle Isle Park, on the eastern riverbank, also has a play area that provides a green space for ball games, picnics and a quiet space in which to observe the wildlife. Residents have planted wildflowers around the park's borders to help encourage and maintain the wildlife. This group runs on a Sunday morning and is welcoming to all residents.



Bromhams Farm Playing Field on the opposite bank of the river is currently under development. The site is due to reopen in 2026 with three new football pitches and a baseball pitch.

Trews Weir Allotments – three sites adjoining the river in the far east of the ward.

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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.

St David's is a fragmented area, criss-crossed with large roads and the river. The only Community Centre in the ward is [Exeter Community Centre](#), based on St David's Hill to the west of the area. The principal community spaces are, therefore, church-based or situated within housing developments such as the Shilhay community room.

St Leonard's Church on Topsham Road is not in Newtown & St Leonard's but actually in St David's. The church runs a wide range of groups for different age groups.

South Street Baptist Church hosts the Dove Café on Tuesday mornings from 10.30am until 12 noon. It is a welcoming and safe space that offers free tea, coffee and biscuits until 12 when light, affordable lunches are on sale until 1.45pm.



There is also Renew Refresh, which offers an inclusive space in which “it is ok not to be ok”. This group runs on Thursdays from 1.30pm until 4pm and offers a space in which residents can come and invest in their wellbeing by doing what they need, be it a cuppa and chat, do a hobby or sit in the ‘Quiet Space’ and be still.

St David's Church, opposite Exeter College, hosts a range of activities for residents. There is a Friendship Cafe on Tuesdays and DBN Cafe on Wednesdays, as well as a range of classes and activities throughout the day and in the evening.

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**The Mint Methodist Church** on Fore Street has a wide variety of community-focused groups including yoga, choir, self defence classes, fencing, coffee mornings, IT drop-in, craft groups, morris dancing, a drama group, Brownies, a toddler group and kickboxing. There is also a Saturday walking group.



**Inclusive Exeter** recently moved from The Mint to Southernhay United Reform Church, where they hold a surgery for ethnically diverse communities to be able to access information and support. They also hold an English Conversation group in which people can come and practice speaking English if it is not their native language. This group attracts a wide range of nationalities and abilities.



The **Salvation Army** community hall hosts a community lunch on Sundays, monthly coffee mornings, a parent and toddler group on Monday and Wednesday mornings as well as Rainbows, Brownies, Guides and Rangers groups.

### **What Else Is Happening?**

The Quay and surrounding area offer a wide range of activities such as Clip n Climb, Saddles & Paddles, Scouts, The Canoe Club as well as the Green Circle walking and cycle paths. Throughout the year Literature Works, who are based at Exeter Customs House on the Quay, offer a wide range of activities for residents and families across Exeter. Throughout the summer 2024, this proved very successful as they put on a range of crafts, puppet shows and other engaging activities for children and their families. Exeter is one of only 53 Cities of Literature across the world.

The Quay was also host to the Heritage Harbour Festival throughout June 2024 and the **Exeter Canal & Quay Trust**, together with Exeter City Council, saw in the return of Jazz on the Quay, a series of fun-filled Sunday afternoons filled with live music.



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**Devon Wildlife Trust** is based off Commercial Road and offers lots of wildlife and greening activities across the city.

Exeter Foyer has a building with accommodation for 36 young people, along with access to a wide range of support services, with drop-in advice and job-search sessions.

**Ride On** is a social enterprise based on the Quay that restores donated bikes and sells them on at a reduced price to encourage people to cycle. They also offer bike maintenance classes at a wide variety of venues across the city throughout the year. They are looking to locate to a different venue due to Exeter City Council's plans to redevelop the building it is currently in.

### **Spreading The Word: How Do People Connect?**

The St David's Councillor, Diane Moore, has set up a series of WhatsApp groups as part of a Greening St David's Project. The project has a range of stakeholders including residents, the St David's Partnership, Exeter Community Centre, Exeter Wildlife Trust, Exeter University and Exeter Collage. The aim is to use a range of funding to do up and maintain various green spaces across the ward. These include St Bartholomew's Cemetery and Northernhay Gardens. The Greening Project has included a range of events and activities for residents to come together including a picnic, wild flowering, bird box making, a bat walk and a tour of the St Bartholomew Catacombs. The activities have brought a wide range of residents together over their love and enjoyment of the green spaces around them.

**Exeter Community Centre**, run by the St Davids Partnership, offers a wide range of activities and events for all ages and needs. They also assist residents' grassroots projects by offering support, advice and a bank account for holding acquired funding. This has been helpful for residents that have come together for activities but are not a formalized group or association.



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Cornerstone social housing has a quarterly newsletter for its residents, and a resident's committee that offers support and advice.

LiveWest residents across the Bridge and Bell Courts on Exe Street have a WhatsApp group that shares information, updates and events.

Shilhay has a particularly active WhatsApp group, and residents successfully requested the installation of noticeboards in each of the three courts that make up the community. A resident also writes and delivers a Shilhay newsletter to all the properties.

The Mint Methodist Church and the South Street Methodist Church have noticeboards but there are no other boards around South Street, Fore Street and Exe Bridges.

Most of the advertising of groups and events around the Quay is done through social media or through the shops and cafes, as there are no public notice boards. The shops are very good at carrying leaflets and are very supportive of any activities happening locally.

### **Where Are The Gaps and Concerns? What Potential For The Future?**

Residents previously spoke about loving living close to the river, but had concerns about anti-social behavior in the Quay area. Drug dealing was a concern for several residents, partly because of the proximity of nightclubs and pubs to sheltered housing. These issues are still a concern, however several initiatives have been put in place to address them such as the Devon & Cornwall Commissioners Funding (2022 & 2024). These have enabled residents to use a range of mediums such as the Neighborhood Watch project, lighting, planting, and yarn bombing to take back and discourage the behavior. In some areas such as the Quay and St Bartholomew Cemetery trees and bushes were cut back to discourage drug dealing this was helped in Shilhay by the WhatsApp group as they were able to share information amongst themselves and the Police.

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A growing sense of identity, and an increasing interest in looking outwards, has been noticeable in St David's since the beginning of the pandemic.

The Community Builder worked with several groups of residents who were interested in forming community associations in their neighbourhood, either to support local connection and social cohesion, or to make their voices heard regarding new developments or local issues. The coming together of community support activities during the lockdowns prompted renewed connections between the east and west ends of the ward. This brought more connectedness and the sharing of ideas, skills and information such as Joe from the Belle Isle Wild Flowering Group helping residents from around St Bartholomew Cemetery to make bird boxes. More shared connections has made St David's feel more of a whole and less of the original micro-community's displacement.

Recent developments of student accommodation in the west of the ward have caused consternation locally, with a feeling that their perspective has not been considered by Exeter City Council and other stakeholders, and some unhappiness about student behaviour. Similar worries have been expressed about the planned redevelopment of the Harlequins Shopping Centre and the Haven Banks developments. These concerns have given residents a shared conversation, sense of community, togetherness and a purpose in defending their community.

