

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

Wonford & Priory 2021-22



Introduction

Welcome to Wonford! 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 is there; 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 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.

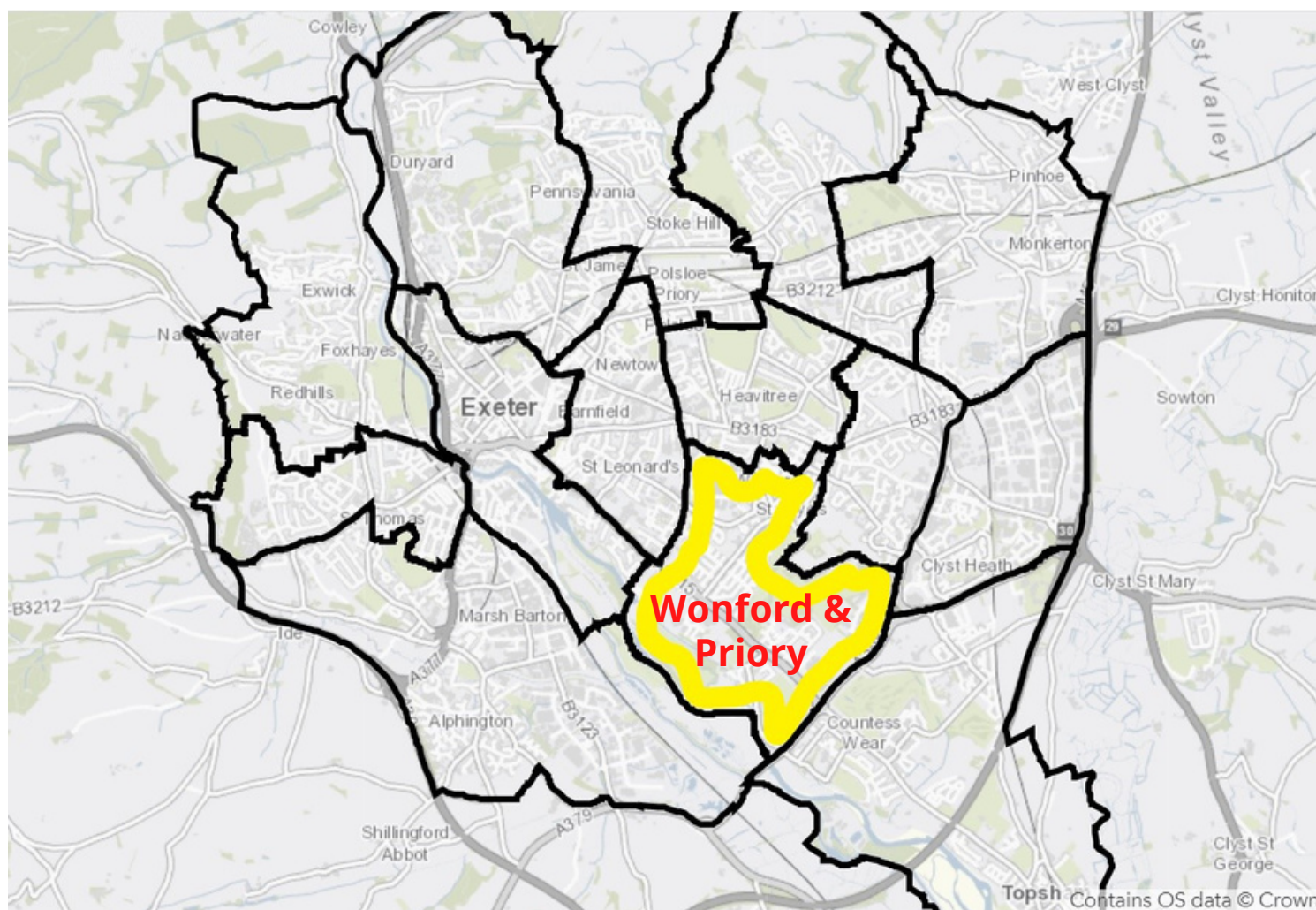


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Picture Of A Place

Wonford is in Priory Ward, which includes the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital site, and the area around Burnthouse Lane, which is considered the focus of Wonford identity (and is home to the doctors' surgery, Wynstream primary school, community centre, supermarkets, pharmacy, post office and sports centre), but also extends to the other side of Topsham Road as far as the river, which is quite a different demographic. Those streets to the west of Burnthouse Lane are named after poets, and those to the east after trees, hence local reference to Poets and Trees as geographic areas! Housing is largely an inter-war estate of brick-built houses, replacing a city-centre slum, and designed with a Garden City ethos, and including a pub, school, churches and shops, and a recreation ground. A new development of one and two-bedroom flats was built in 2018 on Burnthouse Lane.



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Millbrook retirement village is another new development, which is a largely self-contained community of owner-occupiers and private renters, on the far side of Topsham Road. The newly finished Edwards Court complex will soon welcome residents with extra care needs. The boundary between Wonford and Heavitree is especially complex, with social considerations coming into play. A certain distance along Rifford Road, and people like to describe themselves as in Heavitree or St Loyes. Although there is a certain degree of snobbery in this (Wonford suffers with a poor reputation in the wider city, despite being much-loved by residents), many long-term residents are proud to say they are 'Laners' as locals are known, after Burnthouse Lane, the central thoroughfare through Wonford. Generations of families, born and subsequently housed in Wonford would not want to live anywhere else.

The area is considered at high risk of frailty. The areas bordering and to the east of Burnthouse Lane rank as the more deprived - in the 20% most deprived Index of Multiple Deprivation quintiles nationally. Because of these indicators, funding for community projects is often more successful in this ward of Exeter. There is often a sense from residents that they are 'fed up' of external agencies parachuting into the community, not listening to what really matters to the residents. The strong history of community organisers and now community builders in the area, working from the ground up is an important counterbalance to this.

Unlike some other areas in the city, community life in Wonford is no longer strongly centred around churches. The Anglican church of St Pauls, built on Burnthouse Lane to serve the newly built estate after the War, was subjected to arson, fell into disrepair and was demolished in 2010. The Heavitree parish decided against rebuilding and instead wanted to reach out to the whole area by employing a youth worker and running an outreach programme, WASP (Wonford and St Pauls), for families with children aged 5-13. This was based out of the Old Post Office building on Wonford Street, but closed in April 2022. The Wonford Methodist Church is now the only church in the immediate area (the small Baptist Chapel on Wonford Street is now used as an office). The space is used for community group meetings and activity such as Girls Brigade and a Parent and Toddler group. More central to community life here is the Community and Learning Centre and Phoenix Suite.



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There are examples from the Community Builder of a close-knit informal network of friends, family and neighbours locally, who look out for each other, with families cooking additional meals for older neighbours who live alone, helping with household and garden tasks, etc. There is a strong sense of community among the 'Laners'. They are known for their welcoming and cooperative spirit, pulling together in an emergency or when tragedy strikes, including during the Covid-19 pandemic. In one example, following a house fire five days before Christmas, food and gifts were spontaneously collected and given to the family. When a local person dies, often the whole community will attend the funeral, and support expenses for those struggling. A resident said she has lived in different parts of Exeter but keeps coming back to Wonford because it has "such a great community spirit".

Green Spaces

Most of Wonford's outdoor facilities are in the extensive interconnected green space on the eastern boundary, including Wonford Playing Fields and Ludwell Valley Park, which runs the length of Burnthouse Lane and up and across Pynes Hill, and is managed by the Devon Wildlife Trust. Much of the valley is pastureland, grazed by cattle in the summer, with significant areas of scrubland and wildflower meadow. Locals call one area Roly Poly Hill (it's great to roll down in warm weather or for sledging when it snows!). The stream running through the park is known as the Panny - soldiers from the adjacent barracks would bring down the horses to water them, and the soldiers would wash out their pans. Recently local people unveiled a blue plaque on the previous home of Ivy Johns, a local councillor who had campaigned to preserve the valley park.

Residents have said they would use the parks more if there was more seating and lights for the evenings and better paths leading into the parks. Residents have also expressed a desire to have a community camp out in the fields. These are always popular events, with songs being made about the Panny and Roly Poly, and a community picnic taking place in the cherry orchard. In 2022, Freemoovement are running summer family events in the park.



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Ludwell Life is a community group formed in 2016 aiming to protect and improve the social and environmental value of Ludwell Valley Park. Recent projects include native tree planting and a community orchard, as well as work to maintain and improve wildlife habitats, and to oppose a planning application for siting of a golf driving range in the park. Ludwell Life have also created several short walks, complete with direction and maps, to help people make use of the park. They publish a newsletter every two months. South West Military Fitness run a weekly boot camp session from Wyvern Barracks, on the edge of the park. The former Northbrook Golf Course, adjacent to Ludwell Valley Park, was recently designated as a green space, extending this 'green corridor' substantially.

A new 'pocket park' is evolving next to Wonford Green Surgery, with the help of Wonford Planters. This active gardening group, established in around 2014, has been central to outdoor life in Wonford, and to celebrating the history of the area. The Planters have taken on a growing number of raised beds etc in the area, beginning after residents expressed concern about not being able to see the bus coming along Burnthouse Lane because of overgrown bushes. Elsewhere they have facilitated residents taking care of neglected corners of the neighbourhood, and supported school gardening projects. The group has gone from strength to strength, winning Britain in Bloom awards for its work. They have a lot of support from local businesses, and residents who donate plants, and have supported people from other areas with advice on starting their own gardening groups.

Wonford Planters consulted with doctors and residents to come up with a plan for the pocket park, then, with Community Builder support, sought funding from the South West Water neighbourhood fund and National Lottery Awards for all. This overgrown space was transformed into a peaceful oasis and planted with herbs and fruit trees for the use of local residents.



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This included an apple tree dedicated to Mary Carpenter, a nineteenth-century Exeter resident who dedicated her life to educational and social reform. Two newer plaques in the park commemorate much loved and missed local residents, and a collaboration with CoCreate has resulted in event days and workshops with the primary school to produce bug hotels for the park and for elsewhere.

There are children's play areas at:

Chestnut Avenue, supporting play for young families. Residents have expressed a desire to make improvements, and there are ongoing conversations with the council. There is also an older children's play area near the woods which was designed with help from the children of Wynstream School to blend in with the valley behind. Dickens Drive has multi age play equipment. Wyvern Park, at the top of Well Oak Park estate (locally known as Mushroom) also has multi age play equipment, including a MUGA and plenty of green space for picnics, shielded from the road by bushes.

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.

Wonford Community & Sports Centres – although currently separate buildings and institutions (along with the Phoenix Suite, which is leased to the community centre and can be hired out), there are well-progressed plans for these to work much more closely together in future, and to develop their potential as community assets.



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Between them they offer a wide range of activities, although it should be noted that at the time of writing, many of these had newly restarted following the lockdowns, and were very much subject to change.

Staff changes at the community centre have added to the uncertainty. Active options include netball, pilates, line dancing and tea dances, walking football, badminton, wheelchair basketball and Nordic Walking. There is also a gym and various exercise classes, along with a bookable Astro pitch. The osteoporosis exercise group is more specialist and attracts people from across the city. Other options currently include bingo and a baby group. The sports centre staff have been very responsive to requests from residents for specific activities, and connections with community events is growing.

The main hall of the community centre hosts a café every Thursday morning which some of the groups are based around so members can meet socially after their exercise (the Community Builder can often be found here), and a youth café has run in the evenings too. The local Walking for Health group uses the back room of the community centre after their walks. The community centre supplies a drinks trolley and the group contributes £1 each for drinks after their walk.

Following community consultation in 2019 and 2020, plans were developed for a new health and wellbeing hub, to replace the existing community and sports centres.

These plans would deliver the enhanced sports provision local residents wanted, as well as additional dedicated community space. Unfortunately, the pandemic has placed such a strain on the council's finances that the plans have had to be scaled back.

A substantial refurbishment plan for the leisure and community centres, however, looks likely to go ahead with a glass atrium replacing the existing Phoenix suite.



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This will link the two buildings together, as well as creating a visual connection with the valley park beyond and bringing the two elements together in a much more cohesive and community-focused way. At the time of writing, work is ongoing on this development and associated consultation and communication.

St Paul's Green – the site of the former church was used previously by Heavitree parish to hold informal services and events. Residents are keen to see something on this site, such as a community hub with a workshop/café where residents could be taught basic skills to help with getting a job. However, ownership of the lease remains contested between the parish and the council. There is a similar situation at the Old Post Office, also linked with the church, although the Community Builder does make use of this building for pop-up events on an ad hoc basis.

What Else Is Happening?

The new Head of Wynstream School is reaching out to the community post-Covid, starting with cake sales and a summer fair and restarting its PTFA. The school is also on the lookout for residents to volunteer to read to children and for some residents to come in during a lunchtime and teach children to knit. Isca High School is also restarting its concert and other activities.

Wonford Green Surgery – following a series of staff changes, the surgery is in the process of setting up a patients' participation group, along with other ideas, with the support of the Community Builder.

Pubs – The Dolphin on Burnthouse Lane is a St Austell pub and has a community pot for local causes, as well as contributing staff time to work on community projects, and hosting popular community events on significant days, such as the Jubilee. The Wonford Inn also contributes to local fundraising.

Exeter Children's Centre – run by Action for Children since April 2018. They now work with families with children up to age eight, but as in other areas the services now are through referrals or self-referrals, rather than a programme of general access drop-ins.



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Amersham Court is a sheltered housing complex for older residents and families with disabled members. It has a common room which hosts a coffee morning and other events run by and for residents, as well as a seated exercise class open to non-residents.

Amersham Court also hosts the Krafty Kafe group. This came about following Community Builder conversations with a local resident wanting to do something to combat social isolation. The Builder supported her to access a grant from a DCC councillor. Some members used to attend the now-defunct TLC (Together Let's Communicate) mental health recovery NHS group.



Others are outpatients from the Russell Clinic (based in nearby Wonford House, HQ of Devon Partnership Trust, providing mental health services), wanting to begin to re-integrate into community life. Their participation has been facilitated by Wellbeing Exeter following an awareness-raising event at Central Library. The Kafe has begun its own fundraising to support new activities, and has collaborated with artists such as the Double Elephant print workshop in running funded workshops for residents.

Wonford & Heavitree Runners Group runs a Couch25K, Return to Running and a 5K group. There is also a walking for health group coordinated by Westbank that runs in the day and an evening walk group organised by Inclusive Exeter.

Spreading The Word: How Do People Connect?

There is a less active community social media presence in Wonford than in many other areas of the city. Many Wonford residents have said that they don't know what is going on in their area. Lots of people do not access social media. The website thisiswonford.co.uk has a linked Facebook page of the same name.



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This is liked by 400 people and provides a channel for information largely around activities in the community centre, although it does share information from the Community Builder's Facebook page and the sports centre. There is also a reasonably active Burnthouse Lane Facebook page, though many of the posts are for selling rather than community affairs. Wonford Planters has an active Facebook page, but seems to be an exception.

There are no community noticeboards in the area, except the one at the community centre which is used to promote the centre's events. The Community Builder has been in conversation about notice boards in Wonford, as it's one of the key ways to spread the word of what's happening and keep residents informed. There are plans for notice boards to be installed shortly, both outside the community centre, and potentially in the pocket park, with support from Wonford Planters.

Wonford Community Organisations & Groups (COGS) was established by residents to help allocate grant funding. Now the group provides a means of sharing information between local organisations. Although now fewer organisations physically turn up for meetings every couple of months or so, there is a lively email correspondence, which is useful for keeping up to date and in touch.

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

There is not a great deal for older children and teenagers to do in Wonford, especially those who are not sporty, or who cannot travel, with a number of past activities no longer running. The Army cadet corps on Dryden Road is an exception. Exeter Police Cadets started in Isca School but is now held at police HQ.

Residents comment that unless there is a risk of serious anti-social behaviour, there is little interest in providing activities for teens.



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Many people would like to see a skate park, as the BMX track “isn’t any good for skateboards and not many children use it anyway.” Some young people say they would like a teen shelter in the park so they have some place to hang out not just on the streets.

It is anticipated that the loss of consistent free food provision in the area could become a significant problem in light of the cost-of-living crisis.

On the more positive side, there has been a strong focus on making the most of the potential of Ludwell Valley Park, for the benefit of residents, and in attracting those from further afield. The Community Builder and the Live and Move Community Physical Activity Organiser have been a central part in this. The area is developing a reputation for its successful summer cycling events.

Exeter Communities Together chose Wonford as the location for a diversity festival recently, and Inclusive Exeter hosted a launch party here for its summer programme of walks and badminton. It is hoped that this repositioning of Ludwell Valley and Wonford as destinations for other city residents will go along way towards rehabilitating the area’s reputation, and showing other Exeter folk what a great place, and a strong community Wonford is.

