# Exeter City Council prioritises affordable homes over higher bids for Clifton Hill site



Exeter City Council has made a decisive move in the landscape of housing development by approving plans for the Clifton Hill leisure centre site, previously at the heart of significant contention regarding student accommodation. The council has opted to sell this prime two-acre piece of land for £3.4 million, a figure notably less than its market appraisal of £3.8 million, echoing a commitment to community needs over monetary gain.

The site, once home to the Clifton Hill leisure centre—which was closed in 2018 and demolished in 2022—will now be transformed into affordable homes for older residents. Phil Bialyk, the council leader, reinforced this position during the executive committee meeting, stating, “We could get £3.8 million, or even more, if we broke our promise not to build student accommodation.” This sentiment reflects a strong adherence to principles prioritising the well-being of local residents over profit-driven motives, with the council refusing to entertain higher bids from developers proposing student housing.

The council's commitment to preserving the site for residential use isn't an isolated decision; it follows a series of strategic choices. The land had previously been sold to Exeter City Living for slightly over £2 million. However, following the housing company’s financial troubles, which amassed losses of over £4.5 million and resulted in a debt exceeding £10 million owed to the council, the site was repurchased for around £3 million. This history underscores the complexities surrounding the management and development of public land.

The recent planning approval paves the way for the creation of 72 affordable rental units aimed at older residents on the housing register. This development will also feature a café, meeting rooms, and a weekly doctor’s surgery, enhancing community services and accessibility for its future residents. Councillors expressed their enthusiasm and support during the discussions, with Cllr Duncan Wood emphasising the importance of heeding community concerns and acting upon them.

As discussions surrounding housing intensify, local leaders have reiterated the necessity of balancing housing availability with the preservation of green spaces. Green Party Councillor Andy Ketchin recently called for commitments to ensure at least 35% of the development includes affordable housing while safeguarding the adjacent green areas. This dialogue comes amidst broader debates regarding the adequacy of affordable housing provisions in Exeter—a theme that has gained traction as the city seeks to address the diverse needs of its residents.

Further complicating this landscape, there have been conflicting proposals regarding the future of the Clifton Hill site and neighbouring areas, such as suggestions to utilise the land for student housing instead. In November 2023, a council report recommended selling the land without restrictions, which provoked criticism as it clashed with the council’s stance against prioritising student accommodation. The adjustments within the council's approach illustrate not only the pressures to resolve financial challenges tied to outstanding debts but also the ongoing tug-of-war between commercial interests and community welfare.

Ultimately, Exeter City Council’s decision regarding the Clifton Hill site signals a potential shift towards more socially-responsible urban planning. As the city grapples with housing demands, this initiative may well set a precedent for future developments, reinforcing the message that community needs can take precedence over financial incentives.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 3, 4, 5
2. Paragraphs 2, 6
3. Paragraph 3
4. Paragraph 4
5. Paragraph 5
6. Paragraph 6
7. Paragraph 6

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.radioexe.co.uk/news-and-features/local-news/clifton-hill-project-gets-green-light/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://news.exeter.gov.uk/plans-for-new-homes-at-clifton-hill-are-welcomed/> - In December 2020, Exeter City Council announced plans to develop 42 new homes on the former Clifton Hill leisure centre site, including 11 affordable homes for residents over 60. Council Leader Phil Bialyk emphasized the commitment to preserving open spaces and providing housing for the community. The development aimed to start construction in 2021, with completion expected within 18 months. The homes were to be built to the Passivhaus standard, ensuring energy efficiency and sustainability.
3. <https://news.exeter.gov.uk/demolition-of-redundant-sports-centre-to-create-new-city-centre-homes/> - In July 2022, Exeter City Council began demolishing the former Clifton Hill sports centre to make way for new housing. The council pledged to protect the adjacent open space for public use. The development, led by the council's housing company Exeter City Living, aimed to construct 41 modern houses and apartments, all built to the Passivhaus standard. The demolition was funded by the government's One Public Estate programme, with completion of the new homes expected by early 2024.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx81r7jez33o> - In November 2023, Exeter City Council voted unanimously against selling the former Clifton Hill leisure centre site for student housing, adhering to its policy of not selling land for purpose-built student accommodation. The decision aimed to prioritize community housing needs over financial gain, with the council leader expressing confidence that land sales would address outstanding debts from the council's housing development company, Exeter City Living.
5. <https://exeter.greenparty.org.uk/news/2023/10/16/green-councillor-demands-affordable-housing-and-green-spaces-are-safeguarded-at-clifton-hill-site/> - In October 2023, Green Party Councillor Andy Ketchin called for assurances regarding the future of the Clifton Hill site, emphasizing the need for at least 35% affordable housing and the protection of green spaces. The council had previously acquired the site back from Exeter City Living, which had faced financial difficulties. The councillor sought clarity on the council's commitment to affordable housing and environmental standards for the development.
6. <https://exeterobserver.org/2023/11/23/clifton-hill-sports-centre-site-green-space-mary-arches-car-park-sales-exeter-city-council-student-accommodation-exeter-city-living/> - In November 2023, Exeter City Council proposed selling the former Clifton Hill sports centre site and adjacent green space, as well as the Mary Arches Street multi-storey car park, for redevelopment, potentially as student accommodation. This proposal aimed to address debts from the council's housing development company, Exeter City Living, which had accumulated losses exceeding £4.5 million and owed the council over £10 million.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cq5pdl8g79no> - In November 2023, a report recommended that Exeter City Council sell the former Clifton Hill leisure centre site and the Mary Arches multi-storey car park without restrictions on use, potentially for student housing. This recommendation conflicted with the council's policy of not selling land for purpose-built student accommodation. The council needed to raise funds to pay off debts from the council's housing development company, Exeter City Living, which had faced financial difficulties.