

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

Countess Wear 2021-22



Introduction

Welcome to Countess Wear! 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.



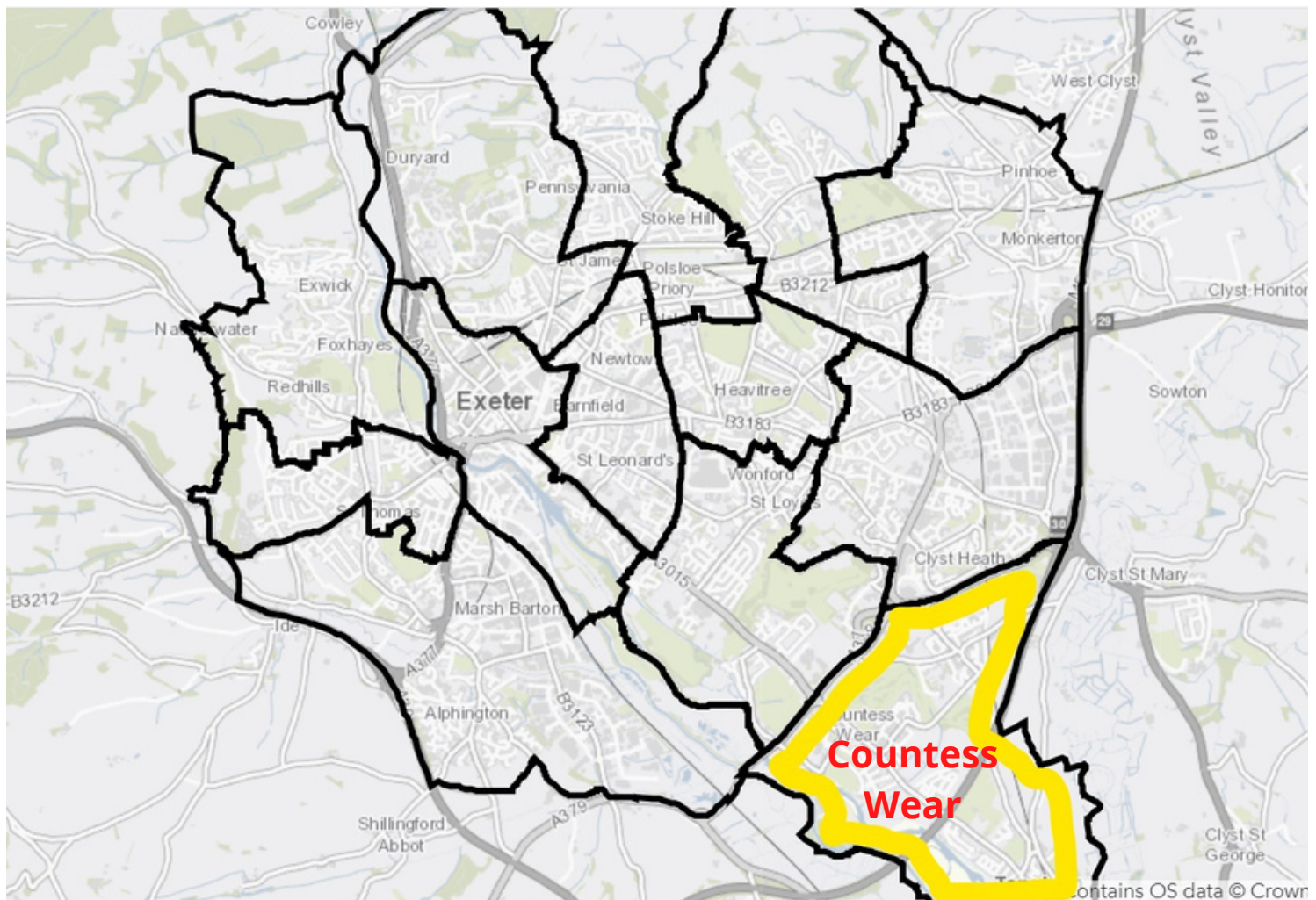
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Picture Of A Place

Countess Wear is in Topsham ward, which includes Topsham village and also Newcourt, as well as the areas in-between or along roads that connect them. The Wellbeing Exeter Community Builder's capacity has for the most part concentrated on Countess Wear, as this is such a large and diverse ward. Partly as a result of this dispersed structure, Countess Wear is less of a self-contained neighbourhood than some other areas of the city, looking partly into the city, and partly towards Topsham itself for facilities and community action.

Countess Wear is effectively two traditionally distinct communities with multiple smaller communities linking to them.



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'Old' Countess Wear, to the west, is centred around the original village, with a village hall, a pub and a church with adjoining community rooms. Further east is a 1950s and 60s social housing development, now mostly privately owned, known to residents as Glasshouse Lane, after the hub of local amenities on this street, and to village residents as 'new' Countess Wear. Local maps or records refer to the Glasshouse Lane area as 'Lower Countess Wear'. Community life in Glasshouse Lane Countess Wear centres around Glasshouse Lane where a group of shops, the community school and medical centre are co-located around a central green space with a nursery and the 100 Club (head offices for Devon Youth Services), located close by. The shops include a post office, convenience store, gents hairdressers and a fish & chip shop. Café 24 also opened here in early 2019 and is highly prized by local people as a great community and social space, and includes a small community library. The owner and staff are very supportive of local community activities and events. The medical centre (which is linked to Topsham Surgery) has an adjoining pharmacy. Currently 101 new homes are being built just off Wear Barton Road in what used to be an empty field, frequently used by local walkers and dog owners.

There is also a growing number of 'pocket' communities between Countess Wear and Topsham village. One is the park home village for over-50s, Newport Park, with around 130 existing homes, and another 30 nearing completion. Traditionally a lower-cost form of accommodation, park homes in Newcourt Park have risen in price over recent years (one home on the site was recently on the market for £230,000), so more recent arrivals tend to be wealthier. There is currently no community space on the site.

Seabrook Orchard is a new development of 700 two, three and four-bedroom homes; around half of which were completed at time of writing. There are plans for shop and café spaces, as well as community allotments. This neighbourhood appeals to established and financially secure households. Residents link with activities and groups in both Topsham and Glasshouse Lane, but are also actively developing a distinct hyper-local community. The Chase, a smaller new-build of 50 zero-carbon homes between Seabrook Orchard and Topsham, also has an active local community, identifying more closely with Topsham.



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Two of the main arterial roads, Topsham Road and Rydon Lane, have housing along parts of them, but there are few green spaces or meeting places, so many residents know only their near neighbours.

All these areas have distinct characters and traditionally there is little community interaction, though this may change as new and younger residents, attaching less importance to perceived boundaries, move in. This is especially likely as the new developments physically connect the previously distinct areas.

There is a Golf & Country Club opposite Glasshouse Lane area which offers local access to golf, swimming, fitness and socials, though owing to cost the local clientele is mainly taken from Topsham and Old Countess Wear. A number of bus routes serve the Glasshouse Lane area, connecting to Topsham and Newcourt amongst other suburbs and to Central Exeter. The nearest library is in Topsham, in the new Nancy Potter community building there run by Estuary League of Friends, though one local resident has set up a little library in her garden.

Green Spaces

King George V Playing Fields, located between Topsham Road and Countess Wear Road in the 'old' village is a large space and a centre for football in the city as well as the meeting point for a weekly health walk. There is a children's play area at one end (recently earmarked for closure), and an inclusive play area, run by MENCAP, at the other, plus two tennis courts.

River Exe Country Park is an extension of the Riverside Valley Park.

Two new football pitches with changing rooms are being built along Fortibus Road, in the Glasshouse Lane area. These will be maintained by the university but open to community use as well. In summer of 2021 gypsies/travellers made camp there and caused local concern for new and old residents alike. The developer has said they are going to make the site more secure.



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Lakeside Avenue MUGA and play area is located adjacent to the central shops in the 'new' village. During 2020 a large group of gypsies/travellers took up residency on the green space along Lakeside Avenue, causing lots of local concern. The Council built a large mound of earth on the perimeter in an attempt to safeguard it and barriers were also installed. The MUGA is not heavily used. Residents have expressed an interest in making better use of the space for community activities and events. Suggestions include family-friendly outdoor physical activity sessions. The Community Builder, together with the Community Physical Activity Organiser (CPAO), have supported this desire, through listenings and pop-up activities in the space, to encourage wider participation.

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.

There is a lack of accessible community space in Countess Wear (especially in the Glasshouse Lane area) whether dedicated community buildings, or commercial cafes and meeting places. Attempts some years ago to build a 'shared' community centre for the whole community did not come to fruition.

Countess Wear Village Hall is a new building, opened in 2016. This is at the heart of the old village, across the road from the pub, and round the corner from the church. It is let out to a wide range of organisations: a brochure brings together information on activities: yoga, pilates, akido, dance, parents and toddler group, concerts, crafts, both weekly classes and one-off workshops and performances, with a central booking system. The hall is run by long-standing committee and board of trustees, who are keen to encourage new people to volunteer for these roles.



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St Luke's Church Community Rooms are right next door to the village hall. The rooms are used by the likes of pilates, yoga and art classes, as well as Slimming World and the Exeter Police & Community Choir.

100 Club building is primarily used for housing youth activities and is managed by Space*, who run youth services for Devon County Council, as an activity centre, but also as its organisational headquarters. Space* runs sessions for young people of secondary school age upwards, and the building also lets out its space during school hours for £17/hr. This building previously had much wider community access, and this is missed by local residents. *The 100 Club Community Group* was formed with the aim of maintaining use of the space for community purposes. Several activities come under the community group's banner including a playgroup, walking netball and, in the winter, short mat bowls. A Wednesday coffee club for senior citizens that used to be hosted at the 100 Club has recently moved to a Friday at the Newcourt Community Centre, emphasising the importance of the bus route and the connectedness of the two areas. The Coffee Club also organises events and trips for their members.

Countess Wear Community School - school buildings are let out for a variety of purposes, such as karate, a slimming group, and a private holiday music school runs outside term time. Until Covid intervened, School Feast Together was a monthly initiative run by the school, offering the public a communal meal at the school, where they are served by pupils. It was open to anyone in the community but mainly attracted over 55s. At the time of writing this hasn't restarted but is regularly mentioned by residents when asked what they enjoyed in the local neighbourhood.

What Else Is Happening?

Residents of a block of flats owned by Cornerstone on Heneaton Square have identified an unused office in their block of flats and are interested in finding out if this could be of potential use as a community space.



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A local neighbour in Wear Close transformed her front drive into a pot and growbag veggie and plant garden for local children. She hosted regular garden club meet ups for the kids, particularly in spring and early summer and it was a real hub of community.

Spreading The Word: How Do People Connect?

There are two very active social media groups on Facebook: Countess Wear Community Group and Born & Bred in Countess Wear. On these sites neighbours share information, ask questions and support each other. Generally, the use of these social media groups is positive and supportive, though they can be used to air neighbourly concerns.

The Community Builder's monthly update is important for connecting people, especially those not on social media, to what is happening locally.

Many neighbours hang out in Café 24 where they share news and information through word of mouth.

Both St Luke's Church and the village hall produce brochures carrying information on their own events and local advertising. Noticeboards are also located outside the hall and church promoting their activities. There are noticeboards on the wall of the convenience store in Glasshouse Lane advertising events at the village hall and those supported by the 100 Club Community Group. Many of the shops in Glasshouse Lane will also place local notices in their windows and the primary school and medical centre will allow local events to be promoted on their noticeboards. There is a community noticeboard in Newport Park.

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

People would like more community spaces, where it is possible to meet together more easily. In particular there are limited opportunities for indoor physical fitness activities.



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The fact that Café 24 is so sociable and community orientated is much appreciated, but as it is open only in the daytime and not on Sundays, so there remain gaps to fill. Evening and weekend activities and venues are especially missed – there is no pub or restaurant in the Glasshouse Lane area, and most community activities happen during the week. Sundays, in particular, can be very quiet. These concerns are compounded by worries that the level of local amenities does not match the amount of nearby development. The capacity of the GP surgery is a case in point.

There is a general concern about traffic in Countess Wear, sitting as it does beside some major arterial roads, and frequently used as a cut-through by motorists attempting to avoid congestion.

A particularly vexatious concern for Countess Wear residents is the regular stench from the Exeter Water & Sewage Plant behind the estate. It often has faults and failures which leads to neighbours in this area being plagued with horrendous smell of faeces and pollutants. Online petitions have been started by local neighbours over the decades and neighbours regularly put in complaints to both the city council and the water company, but it is an ongoing problem and concern for the wellbeing and comfort of people living nearby.

