



## Neighbourhood Profiles: Countess Wear

### Introduction

Welcome to Countess Wear! This neighbourhood profile draws on the work of the Wellbeing Exeter community builder in Countess Wear, 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 fantastic [JSNA Community Health and Wellbeing profiles](#), 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 its not-so-strengths, and to provide an informed commentary on the health of community life. We've included some brief case studies from the work of the community builder, to give a sense of what this work can involve and highlight the kind of community action going on in Countess Wear. We hope you find it useful.

I moved to Exeter two years ago and my home is now in Countess Wear. Not knowing anyone when I arrived, I decided to volunteer with a number of local groups in order to make new friends. Seeing the huge positive impact being active locally had for me and the other attendees inspired me take up the role of community builder. I hope that my work will allow more people to discover shared interests within their community and forge new connections. Through my involvement with a community-based exercise group, I've seen how one good idea can flourish and now inspires hundreds of people to enjoy spending time together in Exeter's parks each month.

## **Picture of a Place: Natural communities vs ward boundaries**

Countess Wear is in Topsham Ward, which includes Topsham village and also Newcourt. Wellbeing Exeter community builder capacity has for the most part, concentrated on Countess Wear, as this is such a large and diverse ward. Newcourt has its own builder, so has its own neighbourhood profile. 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 itself is effectively three distinct communities: 'old' Countess Wear, to the west, centred around the original village, and 'new' Countess Wear, a 1950s and 60s social housing development, now mostly privately owned, further east. Added to these is the park home village, Newport Park, sited between Countess Wear and Topsham village, and home to the over-50s. There is relatively little interaction between these three.

While asset mapping has been undertaken in both the 'old' and 'new' villages and Newport Park, as the 'old' village sits in Priory Ward the primary focus of the Community Building role for Countess Wear will be the 'old' village and to a lesser extent the park homes.

The 'old' village has a village hall (see 'community hubs'), a pub and a church with adjoining community rooms. Community life in 'new' 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 the 100 Club located close by on an adjacent avenue. The shops include a post office, convenience store, gents' hairdressers and a fish and chip shop. A café also opened here in early 2019 – the only one in the 'new' village. The medical centre (which is linked to Topsham Surgery) has an adjoining pharmacy. A number of bus routes serve the 'new' village centre 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.

Newcourt Park is a privately owned park homes site with around 130 homes, and another 30 nearing completion. Residents must be 50 or over. 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 no community space on the site. Residents report that there used to be a community association here, but one does not exist currently.



promoting their activities. There are notice boards on the wall of the convenience store in the 'new' village advertising events at the Village Hall and those supported by the 100 Club Community Group. Many of the shops in the 'new' village will also place local notices in their windows and the primary school and medical centre will allow local events to be promoted on their notice boards. There is a community noticeboard in Newport Park.

### **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, 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* 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 professional-looking brochure brings together information on activities: yoga, pilates, aikido, 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.

*St Luke's Church Community Rooms.* 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 and 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. They run sessions for young people of secondary school age upwards, and the building also lets out its space during school hours for £17/hr. A local initiative, the 100 Club Community Group (<https://www.facebook.com/100CCG/>) also base themselves here with the aim of keeping the 100 Club open as a community venue. Several activities come under the community groups 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 members.

*Countess Wear Community School.* School buildings are let out for a variety of purposes such as a karate club and slimming group and a private holiday music school runs outside term time. School Feast Together is a monthly initiative offering the public a communal meal at the school, where they are served by the pupils.

Cafe 24 has recently opened in the shops in the 'new' village and while privately run could become an important place for local people to meet.

### **What else is happening?**

The move of the coffee club to Newcourt has led to a closer collaboration with the Community Builder for that area, with the idea to connect together those voicing new ideas across the two communities and to help increase the audience for existing community groups.

### **Councillors' Support**

Ward grants have recently been granted to:

- The 100 Club community group for their weekly drop-in session
- The Coffee Club towards a members' outing
- Countess Wear Community Theatre
- Countess Wear Community School (providing breakfast for children in the inclusion hub)

### **Where are the gaps and concerns? What potential for the future?**

People would like a community café and it will be interesting to see if the newly opened Cafe 24 can fulfil this role.

Residents have expressed concern about the capacity of the surgery to cope with the number of new residents in the area.

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.

The MUGA on Lakeside Avenue appears underused and running some pop-up games sessions over the summer will be a great opportunity to engage the community with this asset and with the Community Building project.