



Exploring Community Wellbeing in Context: A place-based scoping study

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Introduction

Much has been made in recent years of the importance of ‘wellbeing’ to an individual’s prospects for a happy life. This concept generally involves a holistic approach to defining a ‘good life’, including not only biomedical aspects of health, but also financial security, education, employment, access to green space, and so on. Understanding the relationship between these elements, and how this adds up to a happy and fulfilling life, has been an important and revealing project, and a much-needed counterpoint to less nuanced, more materialistic assumptions of earlier times.

Alongside this has been a growing interest in the idea of collective, or community wellbeing – an assessment of the ‘health’ of a community in terms of its ability to bring people together, foster a sense of collective identity and belonging, be inclusive and responsive to its residents, develop resilience and the ability to cope with change and support its more vulnerable members, and generally enabling community members to live rewarding, mutually sustaining lives. Community wellbeing is a quality of *interdependence* rather than independence – a recognition of the value of collaboration for common good. It is, crucially, more than the sum of its parts, and speaks to the relationship between people and place. There are substantial challenges in measuring this effectively, but that attention is being paid to this area is good news.

So far, so good. However, what has been considered less carefully is the *relationship* between these two forms of wellbeing: the personal and the collective. Why is it that an area where measures of personal wellbeing reveal a population in poor health, with limited education and low levels of income, can be home to a thriving community, with strong examples of interconnection, mutual support and local action, very much more than a sum of its parts? Why is it that another neighbourhood, where people are healthier and wealthier, has very low levels of community identification, and correspondingly high incidences of loneliness and isolation? Or, indeed, vice versa. We know very little about the process by which wellbeing is generated and shared, or the mechanisms through which strong collective wellbeing might improve personal wellbeing. Or not, as the case may be.

This research sets out to make an initial identification of the factors potentially influencing the relationship between personal and collective wellbeing. It does this in a firmly place-based perspective. At the Devon Community Foundation we are constantly reminded of the huge variation within our county, on just about every level, be it demographic, topographic, economic, political, or in terms of deprivation. This is therefore not an abstract problem; for us, it’s a problem of place, and our investigation is also rooted in place. We have therefore considered this question with special regard for four different locations:

- **Market Town:** Tiverton
- **Coastal Community:** Ilfracombe
- **Rural Village:** Hemyock
- **Urban Neighbourhood:** Newtown & St Leonards, Exeter

We have made use of our network of partners and contacts to learn about these areas, and identify people, organisations and movements to visit and speak to, in an effort to get ‘behind the scenes’ as efficiently as possible. The type of engagement in each area has varied according to our existing relationships, and what made best sense of the place, from multiple visits and chance encounters in the street, to focus groups, to online and telephone discussions, to participation in relevant meetings. This is an abstract question to explore, so of necessity our approach has been to stimulate broad conversations about a community’s strengths and challenges, and to ask about how different elements work together. Many participants reported that they found the experience of being asked to think about ‘their place’ in this way at once unfamiliar and unexpectedly revealing.

This question is of practical importance to the Devon Community Foundation because of our growing interest in the challenge of supporting communities to develop their collective wellbeing. We recognise that often it is not sensible simply to fund isolated organisations to deliver projects or services to specific groups of people (although many such organisations do excellent work). Rather, we want to find ways to contribute to community life in a more holistic, and hopefully sustainable way, investing in relationships as much as particular activities. Understanding the elements that might contribute to this vision (or the potential obstacles to it) is therefore essential for us.

Our aim has very much been a situated investigation, with attention to the detail of each location. This is revealed through the case studies outlined here. We have also however been interested to try to pull out certain common threads, to identify factors that may be more generally significant in understanding the relationship between personal and collective wellbeing. This is outlined in the second section.

This research was very limited in scope, with no idea of coming up with definitive answers to this complex question (there’s a PhD in there for someone!). Instead, we aimed to work with communities to identify initial areas of interest - points of departure, if you like - for fuller investigation. We look forward to opportunities to follow these up in the near future.

Acknowledgments

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The Places

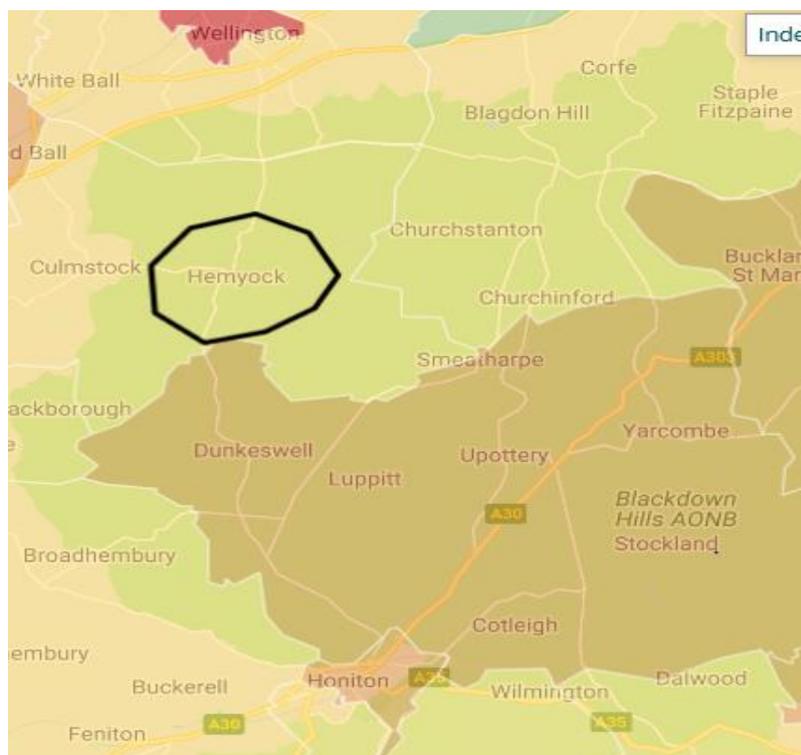


Hemyock: The Rural Village

Overview

Hemyock is a village in Mid-Devon with a population of around 1500 people (the parish of Hemyock, with its surrounding hamlets, comprises slightly over 2000 people). It is around 8 miles north of Honiton (in East Devon), and only 5 miles from Wellington in Somerset, and is the largest village within the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The village is one of the least-deprived areas in the Mid Devon district, with good levels of health and education, low incidence of crime and relatively few benefits claimants. In common with other rural areas, not being on the mains gas supply can lead to difficulties with fuel poverty and inadequately heated houses.



The village has a primary school, pre-school playgroups, a medical practice and a wellbeing centre, not one but two parish halls, sports facilities (football, tennis, bowling green, etc), two churches, two shops, one with a post office, and a number of other services such as hairdressers, garages, and a lettings agent. There is a range of community groups and voluntary organisations based here. Hemyock is a village of noticeboards, which are well-used for advertising local events, classes and groups. The parish council minutes are also displayed outside one of the shops. The village also boasts an informative website, well-used by the town council. There are three buses a day to Taunton, and four to Honiton, but you can only go to Tiverton for two hours on a Friday.

Where does the council fit?

Administratively, Hemyock could be described as multiply liminal: one councillor commented 'we're on every border going'. The village is very close to the intersection of East and Mid Devon district councils, and also to the county border with Somerset. There is therefore a powerful local narrative of self-sufficiency that says they cannot expect to be a central priority of county or district government, and are better off taking control of what they can locally. They are, however, centrally sited within the Blackdown Hills AONB (the AONB office is in Hemyock), and are part of a network of AONB parish councils whose composition is two-thirds from Devon and a third from Somerset, so although this crosses numerous administrative boundaries, it is in many ways a more meaningful 'locator' for the village.

This sense of needing to do things for themselves has informed Hemyock Parish Council's interest in recent years in taking control of local infrastructure: 'we are big on asset management', says Penny Lawrence, a councillor just beginning her second term whose family have been in the area since the 1840s, and whose father and grandfather were also on the council. Hemyock Parish Council took on the car park in the centre of the village from Mid Devon District council about 18 months ago after they were told they would have to make large contributions for upkeep and resurfacing. They bought it for £2000 (the only parish council to respond in this way) and have improved pedestrian access to it. It was a similar story with the public toilets (the only ones in the AONB). Now these are cleaned by someone in the village. The council also owns the sports centre, developed 11 years ago jointly with a developer.

This kind of project requires a certain pool of skills and experience, as well as no small dose of confidence. It helps that there is both a quantity surveyor and a builder on the council, and there is a 'very good clerk'. It's important too that ongoing effort is put into engaging with residents in a variety of contexts. 'People talk and get the wrong end of the stick and there are Chinese whispers', says Penny. She has a council stall at the monthly markets, and is planning to attend the school summer fair, as local mums who have grown up here are some of the people less actively engaged with the council. There is also a newsletter, of which 800 copies are printed.

The Parish Council also owns the Blackdown Healthy Living and Activity Centre, opened on the site of a milk factory social club in 2010, at the instigation of a local GP. The centre hosts daycare and social clubs for elderly people, and those with dementia, a memory café and a pre-school group, and can be hired out for parties, meetings and events. A cinema club is planned. The Blackdown Support Group is a team of volunteer drivers, providing essential transport for centre users in this rural area. The AONB office is soon to relocate to the Centre, as its current home is being redeveloped. It is hoped that being at such close quarters might lead to some new collaborations.

Local action

As in many areas, planning is an issue that can galvanise local collective action, when an area or amenity is seen to be under threat. Hemyock Takes a Stand is a varied group of

residents and parish councillors who came together when two large planning applications were made for developments in the village. One was approved, but with provision for the village to take on a 7-acre plot of land, with a view to developing a community orchard – something local people had long-wanted. The other, considered inappropriate, was rejected, after the eagle-eyed parish council clerk noted that dilapidated chicken sheds, claimed as existing development, did not count as such. Over 100 letters of objection to this application were written by residents. A parish meeting on this subject had 50-60 people attend. Another application requiring the group's attention is in progress.

There is a sense in the village that it is possible to take action to make something happen, even without requiring a pre-existing organisation, or complex infrastructure. Lights Brigade was born out of a light-hearted conversation between some artists in the village pub around five years ago, when someone noted that the next-door village, Culmstock, had attractive Christmas lights, while Hemyock did not. Now the whole community is invited to come along to the Garages youth centre to make lanterns according to an annual theme, then there is a procession through the village that is extremely well-attended, and spoken of with much enthusiasm.

One resident says that both living and working in the village has made a substantial difference to her sense of belonging. Although there is no large local employer, there are a number of self-employed people and small businesses operating from the village (there is a row of small industrial units).

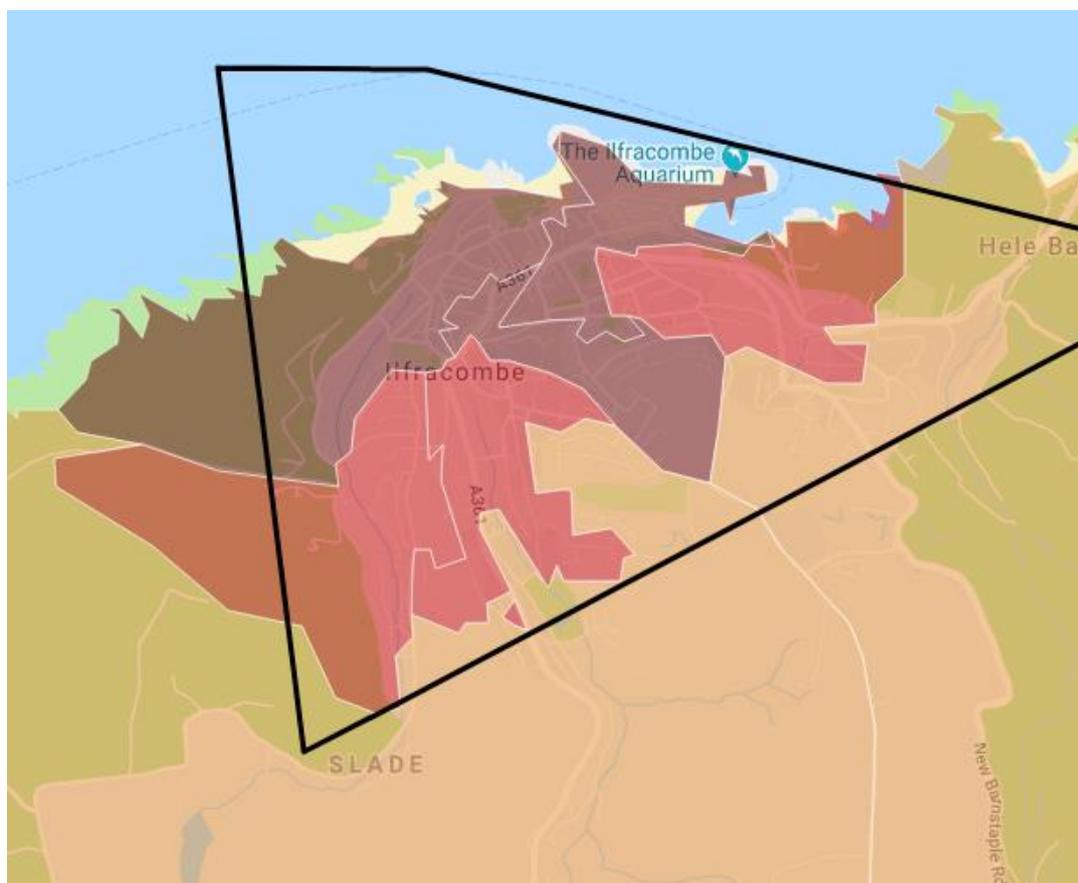
A newly arrived resident explained how she takes her elderly neighbour shopping every week. She learned quickly when she moved to Hemyock (and several neighbours knocked on the door within hours to offer childcare and other support while they unpacked) that it was the kind of place where that sort of neighbourliness is commonplace. She has also joined the village netball team. She says she'd never have considered this when she lived in Taunton, and although she did not know personally any of the other team members when she joined, because it was so local – in her place – and because although she didn't know them, she recognised them as fellow villagers, she's now a regular member. There's something about living in a community like this, she says, that makes you want to join in.

Ilfracombe: the coastal town

Overview

Ilfracombe is a town of around 11,500 people on the North Devon coast. The town is 12 miles (about half an hour by car) from Barnstaple, the main town in North Devon, and 57 miles (about an hour and a half) from Exeter. Ilfracombe's rail link closed in 1970. The town has a secondary school with sixth form, a community hospital (with an active Friends group), cinema, theatre, leisure centre, and an award-winning park. There are a number of churches, which have a strong social mission (see below). Ilfracombe is very hilly. Access to the High Street, for example, is especially steep from all directions. This can mean that for those with limited mobility even those amenities that are very nearby as the crow flies can be difficult to access, resulting in isolation.

A Victorian seaside resort, the town is still popular with tourists, and retains a working harbour, though nowadays it has significant challenges. Parts of central Ilfracombe are among the most deprived areas in the county, with a life expectancy fifteen years lower than in some leafier parts of East Devon. With a tradition of holiday boarding houses, Ilfracombe's housing stock is overwhelmingly in the private rented sector (one part of central Ilfracombe has 51% rented accommodation, against a national average of just 15%). Much of this in a poor state of repair, but its ready supply and affordability has meant Ilfracombe has become a destination for more vulnerable people with complex needs.



Ilfracombe, Index of Multiple Deprivation

A piece of public health needs analysis a few years ago identified some distinct population groups who are potentially vulnerable:

- Elderly retirees
- Young people with physical and mental health needs
- 'Indigenous' people doing seasonal work

Certainly, this is a highly seasonal town, with employment relating to visitors fluctuating considerably over the year. Several people noted how the town hibernates during the winter, to a greater extent than Devon market towns which are not focus for tourists.

'An island off an island'

Ilfracombe is seen as being on the periphery of the periphery – 'an island off an island', as someone put it. North Devon is a remote area, and Ilfracombe is some way from Barnstaple, where local services are concentrated. Any administrative business relating to benefits, the Citizens' Advice Bureau or the Job Centre requires a trip to Barnstaple.

As in Hemyock, this liminal status has produced a degree of self-sufficiency, with voluntary organisations stepping in to fill gaps in statutory funding, especially in mental health and youth services. An example is On the Doorstep, a grassroots charity set up by two women who work in a local dentists' surgery, and wanted to coordinate practical, in-kind support in response to specific families' needs. Through a facebook page they source donated furniture, clothing, kitchen equipment etc for people in crisis from fellow townspeople.

One resident (and town councillor), while applauding these efforts, questioned whether we should consider this sense of self-sufficiency a virtue – local resourcefulness has been a necessary response to austerity, which 'lets the council off the hook'. In this sense, someone observed, Ilfracombe is big enough to have social problems, but too small and remote to attract the funding to solve them.

Possibly as a result of its distance from other population centres, Ilfracombe is a distinct and readily identifiable community. As a coastal town set in beautiful countryside, this is an area popular with incomers of all ages. For all its structural challenges, Ilfracombe is seen as a welcoming and accepting place: people commented that it was 'very friendly', with a 'great sense of community', and that people were 'fiercely proud of Ilfracombe'. 'It takes a long time to get down the High Street', says one commentator. Someone else said: 'I don't live in a town, I live in a community'.

One Ilfracombe

There is no single dominant institution in the town. A newly elected town councillor said she felt the council had to do more in reaching out to people, but that poverty disenfranchised people, so engaging everyone would be a challenge.

One Ilfracombe is a partnership established as a not-for profit company that was initiated when the Town Council successfully applied to be pioneers for the DCLG Our Place programme in the early 2010s. Its aim is to make services more user-focused, and brings together residents, councillors, schools, businesses and other public sector people. One Ilfracombe has two main elements: the Town Team brings together public agencies to work more closely in partnership to solve problems such as anti-social behaviour. The Living Well strand has a similar aim for health and wellbeing, convening a monthly Living Well network meeting, which brings together people working in the area of health and wellbeing from the public, voluntary and private sectors to share information on opportunities. It includes a community connector role to support residents to link with services and voluntary activities in the town. There is general agreement that the various agencies do work together effectively in the town, though links with voluntary organisations could be stronger.

Baptist Church coffee morning

This weekly event is a collaboration between several local churches, based in the Baptist church because of its central High Street location. When I visit the tables are buzzing with conversation as around 20 people enjoy free a cup of tea or coffee and a slice of cake or toast. Frances has been the coordinator for the last 7 years and the coffee morning predates her. It is self-sufficient, with a rota of volunteers from all participating churches; donations cover the cost of food. They are sensitive to the potential impact on local businesses (and to the capacity of volunteers), and therefore only open once a week. One of the volunteers on the day I visit is a young man from eastern Europe.

Visitors are from a range of backgrounds, including homeless people and ex-offenders ('sometimes a regular will spend some time in Exeter [prison], then we'll welcome them back'), or those who have problems with drugs and alcohol, or are isolated. Sometimes they feed someone who is hungry: 'someone who can eat six slices of toast in a row has not eaten for some time'.

Word of mouth is what brings most people along (the record is 55 visitors in one morning). Frances is concerned that the Christian association puts some people off, but is clear that they are caring and non-judgemental. She was a single parent struggling to get by at one point, and has some understanding of how lonely it can be (they open occasionally on a Saturday evening, as she knows how hard it can be to be paid on a Friday and have spent all your money by Saturday, with nothing left to go out). It's important to her that they are volunteers, not paid to befriend people, just fellow residents. This empathy is important – many people are not far away from needing support in this way - but Frances is clear that she gets out at least as much as she puts in.

Belle's Place CIC

This centrally located centre hosts activities for children and young people, a school uniform donation scheme, and a range of other activities for people of all ages, all free at the point

of delivery. The manager, Carol, a former teacher, explains that following the closure of the council-run youth centre they bought the building from the council for £1. Having their own building means their overheads are low, and they have plenty of volunteers, but they have no core funding, and rely on a jigsaw of grant funding and donations from local charities and businesses.

One advantage of being independent of statutory control is that Belle's Place has been able to branch out and work with a wide range of age-groups and organisations. Carol runs a drop-in lunch session for three, soon-to-be four days a week, which attracts vulnerable people. The police noticed that anti-social behaviour in the middle of town was lower during the period when the drop-in was open, and now contribute towards the running costs. Much of the food is donated, and a local restaurant also sponsors one meal a month. Carol has recently agreed with the local Coop to be the sole recipient of their waste food. If donated food cannot be used visitors can take it away.

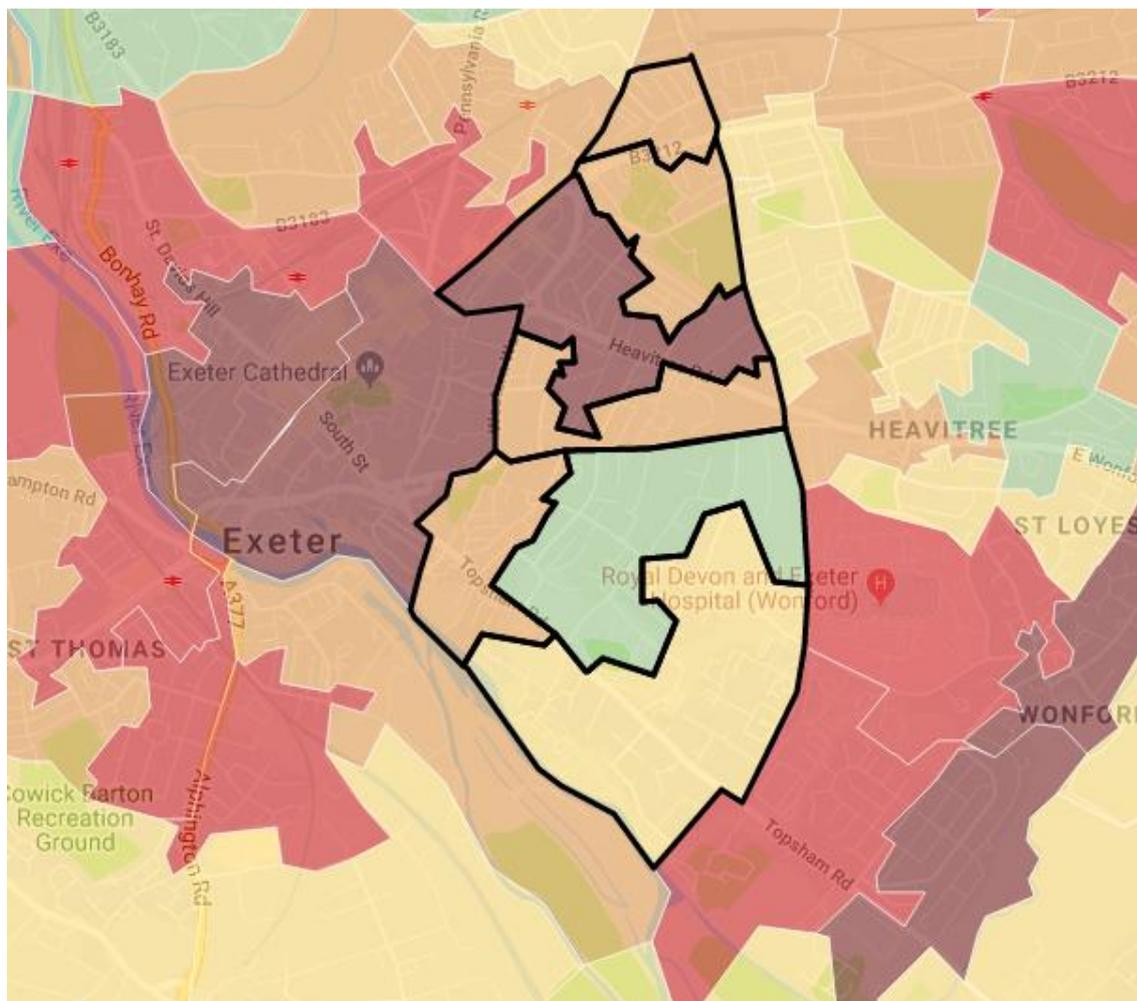
Belle's Place also acts as a host for other local groups (it's much cosier than a church hall). One is a Depression Anxiety support group, and another is a group for the parents and carers of children with additional needs. Carol feels this is a good use of the space: 'we'd rather be open'. She has no hand in running the sessions, but provides the venue, has safeguarding training, insurance, etc, and has arranged for some of the group members to do relevant training (eg first aid) via her contacts, building their confidence and capacity. There's even a dance group run by a group of teenagers. They deal with all the admin as well as teaching, and she is merely present as a responsible adult.

A major advantage of this wider community use is the crossover between the different activities, allowing them to support families as a whole. Carol tells me about a man who comes to the lunchtime drop-in, recently arrived in Ilfracombe where his son and estranged partner live. Knowing and trusting Belle's Place, He now brings his son along to a boxing exercise session. Other lunch attendees go to the depression and anxiety group, and they even come to the Waste Not Café run by Ilfracombe Food Network, who run their pay-as-you-feel café here on the 2nd Saturday of every month, as well as a weekly pop-up stores. Carol is clear that her visitors might well not consider this to be their thing, if it was not in this familiar space.

Belle's Place would like to work more closely with One Ilfracombe, and have professionals with information and support drop in occasionally to their lunches, as they are aware of the potential to support people more widely. She and some of her volunteer team have just done Make Every Contact Count training. They are keen to retain the friendliness and informality, and avoid anything that looks like a council service, because this can be so off-putting to people, but some input from services would be helpful.

Newtown & St Leonards, Exeter: the urban neighbourhood

Newtown & St Leonards is really a pair of neighbourhoods, a single council ward, close to the city centre. Newtown, to the north, is more deprived than St Leonards in the south. DCF knows this area well through our programme management of Wellbeing Exeter, which, among other things, employs community builders to work in each ward in the city, supporting community connection and action, aiming to reduce loneliness and social isolation.



Newtown & St Leonards: Index of Multiple Deprivation

Newtown in particular is known as a diverse, multicultural area, attracting artists and musicians, and both areas retain a villagey feel, despite their central location. There are two primary schools, several pre-schools and nurseries, and some independent schools in the area. There are also a number of sheltered housing complexes, both privately and publicly managed.

Geography does play a role in community life here, though not in the same ways as in more defined rural communities. Because this is an urban area, there is more fluidity about where people consider to be 'their' patch: it is possible for someone to 'adopt' a nearby neighbourhood because it fits them better (maybe their children go to school there, or they

identify more closely with that demographic, or public transport makes that area more accessible), while actually living elsewhere. There have been changes to the ward boundaries over time that mean some people who consider themselves to be St Leonards residents officially live in a neighbouring ward.

It's a mainly residential area, with no large employers, and fewer people who both live *and* work here; those who do work locally, for example in a school, might well travel from other parts of the city and beyond. Many people visit the area to shop (the independent shops in St Leonards are a magnet for people from across the city), and may combine community activity with other errands. Church congregations are a mix of locals and people from further afield. Belmont Park, as the largest park in the area, has a wide 'catchment area'. Distance between things is less important than whether there is a direct bus link, especially for people with more limited mobility.

The Newtown Community Association runs a community centre in Belmont Park – recent rebuilt and about to reopen. St Leonards, despite having an active community association, and a thriving associational life, has no dedicated community centre. This is pointed out repeatedly on the doorstep in the area, whether or not the person has involvement with community activity. There is a sense that a building is a sign of a thriving community (especially for those who are not closely involved), and that people might 'like to know it was there', rather than being particularly bothered from a practical point of view.

Housing

Jayne, the community builder for this area, said she had noticed the way housing was arranged can make a big difference to the neighbourliness of the residents. In Newtown & St Leonards the primary 'unit' of face-to-face community action is a single street, so the design of accommodation has an important role to play.

Cul-de-sacs are especially neighbourly, as are terraced houses opening out onto the street. Flats can be less conducive to neighbourly connection, despite the density of population. The population in St Leonards is quite stable, as there is a lot of owner-occupied housing, although the new estates house people working at the hospital or the university, who are often more transient. Newtown is well-known for the high levels of students living here, who are extremely transient, often moving annually, and who frequently don't have good connections with their neighbourhoods.

Jayne has worked extensively in the area's sheltered housing complexes, and says often residents feel they don't know their neighbours as well as they'd like. In some cases this is not helped by bureaucratic management regulations, for example on the location of noticeboards, and communal spaces can be underused, as there is a sense that people need to seek permission to use it, and that non-residents are not welcome. Jayne has noticed however that residents are not short of ideas and enthusiasm for bringing people together more effectively, and inviting others to share their space: one local nursing home has invited

children from a nearby pre-school to visit them; a sheltered housing complex is running a board games session, which welcomes all-comers.

Coming Together – the power of the campaign

Motivations for coming together can vary. In Newtown, which generally speaking is felt to be more closely knit than St Leonards, incomes tend to be lower, and there tends to be more necessity for people to share skills and resources in the course of everyday living. In St Leonards, where incomes are generally higher, the motivation is more often felt to be social than practical – residents here might associate with neighbours to hold a street party, rather than to borrow a drill.

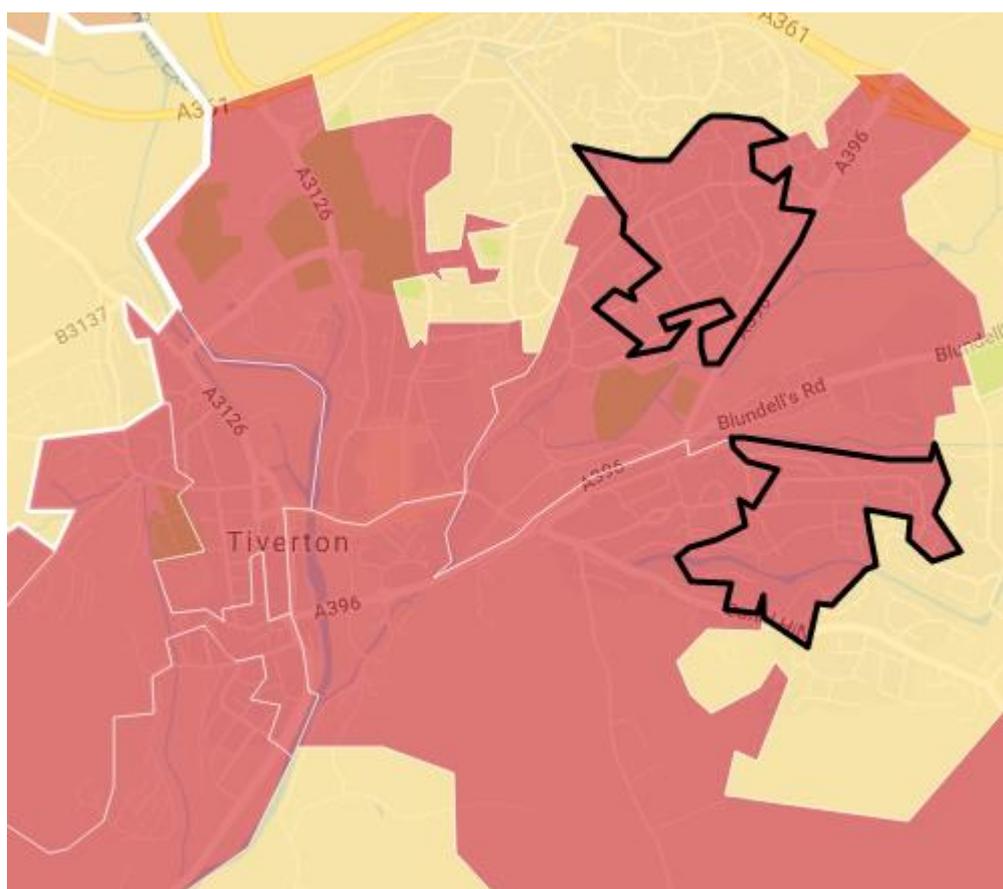
An exception to this, and one which has the potential to bring people from across the ward together in common cause, is campaign groups, opposing perceived threats to local amenities. There have been two active and quite high-profile community-based campaigns in the area recently. One relates to the sudden permanent closure by the city council of Clifton Hill sports centre, following snow-damage to the roof. The other is around threats to the Bull Meadow park, a part of which was under consideration for sale as access to a new residential development nearby. This possibility has recently been ruled out by the leader of the council, who cited well-organised local opposition in his statement, and his willingness to listen to local opinion.

‘Adversity helps’ says Jayne, as people who didn’t previously know each other have come together and shared skills and know-how. They have impressed themselves by how much they have achieved – ‘look what we’ve done’, and how they didn’t need permission from anyone. One campaign member was encouraged successfully to stand for the city council. The ex-editor of the local community association newsletter was amazed by the energy of the campaign groups, when she struggled to find volunteers for regular tasks such as distribution.

The enthusiasm for these campaigns is the counterbalance to the widespread frustration felt by people in this area that their views are not listened to by the council. There is a pervasive cynicism, not necessarily about individual councillors, but about the council as a whole, together with a sense that mechanisms for participation such as citizens’ panels are lip-service. Local people feel, for example, that their views about the negative effects of large student numbers in the area have been disregarded. On the other hand, there remains a clear sense that the council is the institution that ought to be the agency of change (and turnout in recent local elections May 2019 was 39% - the highest in the city). David, a local resident, says he feels the quality of a neighbourhood is built on the wellbeing of the people in it, and relates this explicitly with the sense of being listened to, but also feeling it’s possible just to be present, without being pressured to say something.

Tiverton: the market town

We focused on two neighbouring areas of Tiverton, to coincide with a new community development programme Devon Community Foundation is developing in the area, and to benefit from insights derived from the new links and partnerships being formed here. The areas are Cowleymoor and Wilcombe, in the northeast of the town. Tiverton itself has a population of around 20,000, is the largest town in the rural district of mid-Devon, and the centre of local government. It has a wide range of shops and services, including a community hospital and leisure centre. Exeter is about 12 miles away, linked to Tiverton by the M5, and there is a mainline station near the motorway junction, six miles out of town.



Cowleymoor (top) and Wilcombe, index of multiple deprivation

These two areas show relatively high levels of deprivation, especially in terms of education and skills, in a town that is generally relatively deprived. Cowleymoor's figures for income and employment are poorer than Wilcombe's, despite being closer to the town centre (a short walk away). Wilcombe is a more self-contained area, separated from the town centre by arterial roads, and from neighbouring Tidcombe, to the east, because of a number of no-through-roads. The areas are primarily residential, with high levels of social housing, especially in Cowleymoor – mostly a mix of semi-detached houses and bungalows. Both areas have a shop and a community centre, and there are some well-tended allotments in Cowleymoor. The Tiverton Canal, an attractive wildlife corridor now designated as a country

park, flows through the south of Wilcombe, though as there are few bridges in this area, it does contribute to Wilcombe's sense of being 'cut-off' from surrounding areas.

Both areas are well-served with local primary schools, which are considered approachable and trusted by parents; students go on to Tiverton High School for secondary education, but there is no provision for A levels in the town. Our work with Wilcombe primary school has revealed a school population with some challenging behaviour and limited parental engagement, but a sharply improving picture as regards attendance and results. There are few other amenities, especially in Wilcombe. The space between the two areas is largely filled with an independent boarding school and its extensive grounds.

The Sunningmead Community Centre, across the road from Wilcombe school, has a long tradition of hosting local groups. It is based in an old school building, bought from the Council in 1998, and run by a community association. It has a community café, and a range of spaces for toddler groups, exercise and cultural classes, and various sports, as well as a traditional members social club. Several local organisations also have offices there. It is largely volunteer-run, with a handful of part-time staff. The centre's outside space is large, if rather run-down, and is well-used as a through-route by pedestrians and dog-walkers. The centre has recently secured funding to host a youth worker who is running a club for 8-11 year olds, in collaboration with a local youth service.

In 2018 the community centre devised a survey of local households to learn more about local people's familiarity with and use of the centre. The survey showed people felt it was important that the community centre was there, and three quarters of respondents had visited the centre. But most were occasional visits, to hold or attend a party in the hall, which can be hired, or to vote, as the centre is used as a polling station. Several people surveyed noted they didn't know that so much went on in the centre.

A number of the regular activities held in the centre, such as weightlifting and table tennis, draw participants from across the town. These groups are thriving, and have enabled the centre to be self-sustaining, but apparently at the expense of very local involvement. Although the Centre is directly opposite Wilcombe Primary school local people have observed that parents do not seem to use the community café there. This phenomenon is not confined to the community centre: overall in this area, people's sense of what is 'their' space is extremely localised and/or influenced by a range of other factors, including which school their children attend. This can significantly affect the take-up of, for example, a holiday hunger programme linked to local churches and primary schools.

The Moorhayes Community Centre, just to the west of Cowleymoor, has a similar mix of more specialist bookings attracting people from across the town, and those aimed at a more local audience. The centre is also a popular venue for parties and wedding receptions. Both centres run well-attended bingo nights, for example. Because of its location, Moorhayes serves both the Cowleymoor community, and the area to the north, which has more owner-occupied properties, many of them bungalows, and has an older, slightly more affluent character.

Tiverton Adventure Playground is a long-established fixture at the heart of the community in Cowley Moor. Originally an area of railway land, this wooded and reassuringly muddy corner of a residential area has been a home from home for local children for over 45 years. A recent series of celebrations and displays to commemorate the 45th anniversary is evidence of the strong links with its community. Here, children can play in an unstructured way, do messy craft, help with campfire cooking, and maintenance of the equipment. The playground is run as a charity, with the help of volunteers, many of whom are young people who grew up playing here, and now, older than the 14 year ago limit, can't stay away. The primary age-range is 8-14 years, but on some days the playground is open to younger children, with an adult. There is huge goodwill towards the playground locally, as a safe space that children can access independently. Social media has meant that recently it has pulled in the punters from a much wider area, which is welcome, though the primary focus remains on local children. The vagaries of funding mean the playground opens rather erratically during the school holidays, although the site is used by local forest school groups outside of these public times.

A recent collective conversation about the nature of community in these two areas, bringing together local youth and community workers with ministers, police and teachers, identified family ties as a significant strength in this area. There are relatively low levels of mobility among the population locally, so several generations may all live nearby. This is against a backdrop of general anxiety about the behaviour and outlook of young people, with the police warning about incipient rises in knife crime and county lines infiltration. Many people felt there was a need to increase the overall sense of optimism and pride in the area, and to provide young people with positive alternatives to gang culture. 'Good news' stories, like the improvement in results at Wilcombe school, can be overlooked in favour of a narrative of pessimism and stasis: one commentator noted resignedly that 'Tiverton is slow'.

Common Threads

What can we take from these individual examples that might be of more general applicability in our quest to understand how personal and collective wellbeing relate to each other? The factors that appear to influence this relationship differ in nature and relative significance from place to place. But it is possible to identify certain themes (in no particular order) that emerged from our conversations as potentially important. There is much more to explore, and we are looking forward to finding ways to do that.

Communication: Personal wellbeing is influenced by an individual's ability to connect with the outside world, for example through connection to the internet, or the ability to read. Collective wellbeing is affected by anything that facilitates horizontal connections between people within a place, that is, mechanisms that put to use the literacy and online connection to share news, energy and ideas locally. We'd include here the presence of local media, both online and in print (newspapers and newsletters), and even things like the use of noticeboards. Print media (and to a lesser extent online local fora, though these are often not moderated, and/or can be less inclusive than print versions, with bubbles of like-minded people speaking to each other), can be normative of 'imagined communities'. They can also be important producers of 'bridging' social capital as well as 'bonding' – that is, the civic connections that link 'unlike' people and groups. As local media covers everything happening in a place (the ploughing matches and the WI events as well as the primary school fundraising, as well as the town council meetings), we learn about people other than ourselves.

The number (and quality) of points of connection individuals in a neighbourhood have with each other is also something we'd like to look into more fully. One suggestion is that if two people know each other in more than one capacity (ie, if someone is not only a customer in your shop, but also a parent of your child's schoolfriend. Or if you play badminton with someone who also does odd-jobs for you, or whose elderly mother is in the same residential care as yours), not only might their connection be stronger but they are more likely to transfer trust and mutual knowledge from one context to another. In this way, the skills and strengths of a community can be more readily recognised and shared. This might have economic as well as social benefits. More cynically, an individual has a greater investment in the long-term health of a relationship which has multiple elements than one which is likely to be temporary and more narrowly constituted. Put very simply, then, the more different ways in which individuals are stitched into a local community (for example, by both living and working in the same place, or by volunteering near where you live, or through family connections as well as use of services in one place), the greater the chance of a thriving community. There's lots more to think about here, in particular the relation between these hypotheses and the question of scale.

Voice, participation and belonging: It is important to people that they have a say in local affairs, especially those relating to planning and public amenities. Voter turnout is of course

one indicator of this, but there are other mechanisms by which people can feel their voice is heard, and they can share their views/make a difference. We are especially interested in collective action, such as broad-based local campaigns, rather than individual acts such as signing an online petition. It is also important to consider the relationship local people have with the various levels of local government – how accessible are councillors, what opportunities are there for local discussion and debate? How inclusive and representative are local councils felt to be? How active is the council in improving lives for residents?

Belonging of course is a complex concoction with hints of history, kinship, experience, landscape, emotion, politics, and more. But, let's be honest, the sense that somewhere is 'my place' is a hugely powerful motivator and shaper of lives, loves, and action.

Geography: As this was a place-based study, we naturally consider this to be a very significant element. The delineation of the community (that is, by the community itself, rather than through administrative boundaries) is an important part of this. How clearly defined, and how widely shared this delineation is, and how closely this concurs with administrative divisions is all pertinent, as is its size. All of this can influence the extent to which an individual identifies with a particular place.

Then there is topography: is it hilly (are there benches – especially important for the less mobile), where are the rivers/railway lines/arterial roads, etc. These all have a bearing on how accessible certain areas are – having a leisure centre very nearby as the crow flies is of little practical import if there is a river in the way. More important than topography though is the complexity of the social reasons why one nearby area might not be considered as part of someone's sphere of activity while another is.

A particular characteristic of Devon is the number of small to medium market towns and the significant role they play as a focal point for local communities, including the surrounding rural hinterland. In many cases, these are readily delineated communities – it's easy to draw a line around the town, and determine which outlying villages consider this town to be their primary 'centre'. Correspondingly, there is a strong sense of identity. Market (or coastal) towns are usually relatively self-sufficient when it comes to everyday facilities (a one-of-everything kind of place). So, a doctor's surgery, primary and secondary schools, perhaps a community hospital, high street with largely independent shops, swimming pool/leisure centre, post office, library, maybe a newspaper etc, and a range of community groups. Depending on the size of the town, internal transport may or may not be a consideration, but transport to the nearest larger town, for council services, a wider range of healthcare provision, and employment opportunities, is critical.

Market towns are extremely sensitive to the distribution of resources and amenities by district and county councils. In a largely rural area, often such things will be concentrated in the largest town, with smaller ones missing out, as public transport is often too expensive or infrequent to make the journey practicable. This has practical implications for individuals of course, but there is also a symbolic significance for the relative value local people consider is attached to different communities.

Housing: This is the element on our list that is perhaps easiest to assess statistically. It was evident in all four locations that the affordability, tenure, condition, and even layout of available housing stock can have a bearing on not only the wellbeing of the individuals who live there, but also the quality of community connection and wellbeing. The type of housing and its affordability, as well as having a bearing on individual finances, determines who lives where, and whether different types of people readily mix together.

Mobility: there is no simple determinant attached to the mobility (the rate at which people move to or out of an area) of a population in regards to community wellbeing, but it's worth noting how mobile the population is overall, and who is or isn't moving. For example, if more vulnerable people are those coming and going, it is likely they will be less integrated into local life than is desirable, either for them or the wider community. On one hand, a very stable community can be difficult to 'enter' as a newcomer, and yet 'blow-ins' are often seen to be the movers and shakers (and the bringers-together), as they seek to find their feet. Our experience has shown that in our urban example, mobility (other than extreme transience) is less of a factor than in more rural areas.

Associational Life: Unsurprisingly, whether or not people get together, and take action collectively has a huge bearing on community wellbeing. Neighbourhoods with inclusive, accessible community organisations and facilities are happier places to be. Our research suggests that stable, sustainable organisations that provide a constant reference point in a local area (known fashionably as anchor organisations) can be extremely important, although there is also a role for short-term, dynamic campaign groups. As is noted above, what motivates people to get together can vary – more work is needed to look into this.

What's crucial is a sense that local people feel enabled to establish and join local associations, and that there are good connections between organisations and with the public and private sector. 'Hubs' is the word of the moment: we use it here to mean something quite specific – less a 'one-stop-shop' for consumers looking for services, and more a space – be that community centre, coffee shop, library, pub or even park, - that facilitates inclusive connection between individuals and organisations. This connection is often serendipitous, simply as a result of proximity, rather than any structural relationship, and again, its value is in bringing 'unlike' people together. Not having a hub isn't necessarily a hindrance to community wellbeing (though they are a useful symbol of the value placed on neighbourly connection), but the bringing together of community activity can have unanticipated benefits.