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Introduction

The Parish

The Parish of Neroche lies in the countryside to the South of the county town of Taunton. The West of the parish is situated in the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and extends to over 10 square miles and predominantly consists of farmland and woodlands.

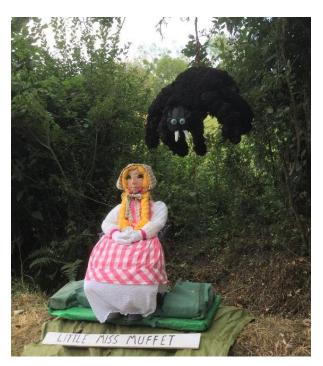


Two protected sites (Sites of Special Scientific Interest SSSI) lie within the parish, Ruttersleigh and Thurlbear Wood & Quarrylands and have been designated for species-rich woodland, ground flora and butterfly species.

Fields are relatively small and characterised with boundary hedgerows with mature trees, with occasional field trees. The slowly permeable seasonally wet clayey soils mean grassland, utilised for dairying and beef with some sheep grazing, are the predominant agricultural enterprises. However, maize crops are also grown on better drained fields. Soils around Thurlbear and Orchard Portman are less challenging and allow for more flexibility in arable cropping. Equine and forestry are the other land-based businesses in the parish.

Woodland at Castle Neroche, managed by Forestry England, offers a variety of footpaths and bridleways for public enjoyment. The 19.2 km (12 mile) Herepath trail is a circular route and is accessible to walkers, cyclists and horse riders.

There are 220 dwellings with a mixture of architectural styles, many lying in open countryside outside the villages and hamlets. The parish has two Anglican churches, serving Orchard Portman and Staple Fitzpaine, a nursery, a primary school, a parish hall, a pub, a nursing home, a racecourse, polo ground and many equine facilities. However, these are spread throughout the parish; the community does not have a single geographical focal point. The parish is bisected from North to South by the main Chard to Taunton road B3170 running through Staple Fitzpaine to Orchard Portman, together with a number of other feeder roads servicing the villages and outlying properties. A range of businesses operate in the parish besides those involved in farming, forestry or equine pursuits. Some work from home, others from converted farm buildings or purpose-built premises. The 2021 census indicates that the Neroche Parish has 520 residents.





There are many examples of the parish coming together to work on projects. The 2010 Parish Plan identified there was poor communication about activities within the parish. Subsequently, a community action group developed the Neroche Newsletter, the Email alert and Neroche Villages website. Amongst current activities are the annual Scarecrow Competition, the monthly lunch club at Neroche Hall, the Pop Up Café at St Peter's church, an active WI, a local band, the fete and various groups at the hall. Neroche Hall is run by a committee made up from local villagers. The Neroche Heritage Fingerpost Project, run by local volunteers, was completed in November 2022. It was funded by villager's donations, the local history group and Parish Council. Two history books by local authors have also been published in recent years.

It is to be hoped the 2023 Neroche Community Review will be the catalyst for a number of new community action groups working together with the Parish Council for the benefit of the parish.

A brief history

Three of our villages are mentioned in the Domesday Book in 1086. Torlaberie (Thurlbear), Staple/Estapla (Staple Fitzpaine) and Bichenhalle (Bickenhall), all of which were held by Robert, the Count of Mortain, half-brother of William the Conqueror. There is evidence of Iron Age occupation in the parish with hill forts at Orchard Hill and Castle Neroche. It is likely Orchard Hill was built sometime from 400BC onwards and was probably abandoned for the site at Castle Neroche, three miles to the south. The name Neroche is thought to be derived from the Old English nierra and rechich or rachich, meaning the 'camp where hunting dogs were kept'. At Castle Neroche, a recent survey by English Heritage suggests three main periods of occupation: late Iron Age; the post Norman conquest period; and the time known as 'The Anarchy' period, between 1238 to 1248.



Castle Neroche 13thC

During medieval times the parish had a settlement at Playstreet (opposite Neroche Hall), which was revealed through aerial photography in 1977. This settlement was likely to have been established in the period immediately following the Norman conquest (11th century) on the edge of the Neroche Forest. It was during this period that the motte and bailey at Castle Neroche was under construction. Following the dissolution of the monasteries, Playstreet fell into several different private hands, by 1602 it was owned by a member of the Portman family. In later medieval times the Portmans, through the marriage of William Portman to Christina de Orchard in 1450, became one of Somerset's leading families.

Over the course of the next few centuries, the Portmans came to own much of the land and property in Neroche (not to mention three hundred acres in central London) and were influential in supporting the movement for agricultural improvement in the 19th century. Many of the cottages within the parish bearing the familiar stone facing

and brick window surround were built during this period. In Victorian times the majority of people in the parish would probably have been tenants who worked on the land. The activities of wives, sons and daughters were vital to the upkeep of the family The 1851 census shows that there were a total 13 paupers in the villages of Staple Fitzpaine, Curland and Bickenhall. At the beginning of the 20th century, Staple Fitzpaine had 2 plough boys, one cow boy and one farm boy all aged 13. Most of the Portman estate passed into Crown ownership in the 1940's. The Crown Estate has since sold off all its tenanted farm and residential properties within the parish. The Forestry Commission, now Forestry England previously leased the forest areas from the Crown Estate but now own Neroche Forest.



Survey methodology

Sponsorship from Smart Communities LTD (SCL) part of the Community Council for Somerset (CCS) provided an opportunity to obtain new data and update information that was last captured from the survey undertaken for the 2010 Neroche Parish Plan. The scope and design of the resident's survey and has enabled a Community Review for the Neroche parish to be undertaken during 2023. This should also foster improved engagement via the Parish Council with the recently formed Somerset Council on 1st April 2023.

The Parish Council unanimously agreed to support working with SCL to develop a Community Review at their meeting in October 2022. Subsequently a Steering Group was established comprising a membership of four parish councillors and four members of the community. The Steering Group worked with parishioners to identify key topics and from these, constructed questions that would make up the survey questionnaire. Topics and production of specific questions were generated through consultation with residents.

The key aims of the Neroche Community Review were to: -

- 1. Set-up a Steering Group, so as to manage communications with residents and SCL and produce the Community Review.
- 2. Undertake a survey of residents of Neroche so as to establish the current issues and needs for the residents within the Parish of Neroche.
- 3. Produce an electronic questionnaire survey, and for residents without access to the internet, production of paper copies.
- 4. Evaluate the responses by use of Survey Monkey.
- 5. The responses will be used to produce a report with a series of action points so as to help address these issues.

Communication with the local community was undertaken via a series of face-to-face meetings, local newsletters, notice boards, Neroche Villages Website www.nerochevillages.org.uk.

Based upon this consultation, the key topics and issues facing the households in the parish were identified. This information enabled the Steering Group to construct a survey questionnaire covering the subject areas below: -

- Demographics of each village
- Climate Change and the Environment
- Traffic, travel and transport
- Rights of Way
- Broadband and mobile phone coverage
- Housing Community and Social activities
- Communication
- Children and Young People
- Businesses
- Parish Council

E-mail addresses were obtained from potential respondents by them sending their private E-mail address to futurenerocheplan@gmail.com. E-mails were used solely for the purposes of the Community Review.

The survey was predominantly completed online but also paper copies were made available where no internet access existed. The survey was open for completion between 3rd to 24th March 2023. 146 survey responses were made generating an indicative response rate of 31%. This is regarded as a much higher result than the average for an online survey by SCL. Most respondents fully answered most of the questions making it a strong representative survey.

The survey findings were collated by SCL who have long experience in community consultation. All responses were managed with complete anonymity.

Two Focus Groups were held in June, one at Neroche Hall and another by Zoom allowing for a fuller and more in-depth understanding of what residents would like to see happening in the parish.

Specific responses to particular questions are detailed in the main body of the report



Survey Results and Commentary

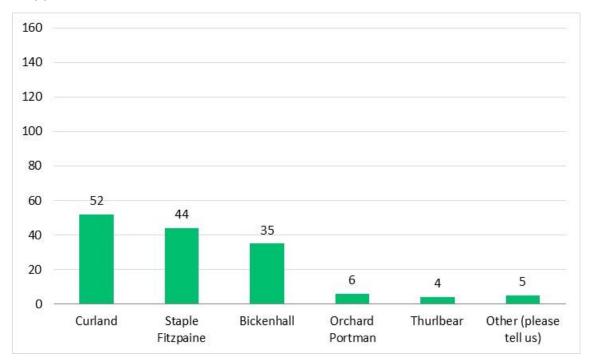


An introduction to who has completed the survey, including some basic background questions about age, household size and how long they have lived in the area. Please note that Census 2021 data is now available at https://census.gov.uk/census-2021-results

Q1 Where do you live?

Answered: 146

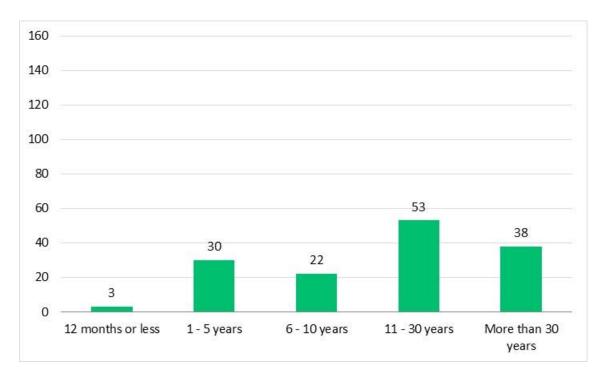
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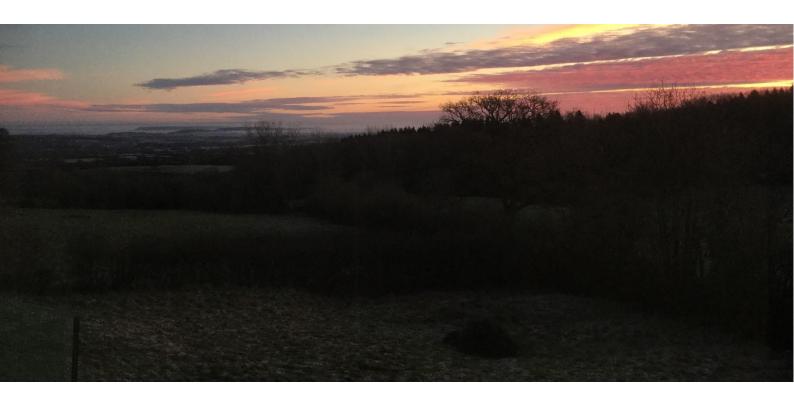
Responses effectively covered the three largest villages. However, Orchard Portman and Thurlbear were under represented.

Q2 How long have you lived in Neroche Parish?

Answered: 146 Skipped: 1

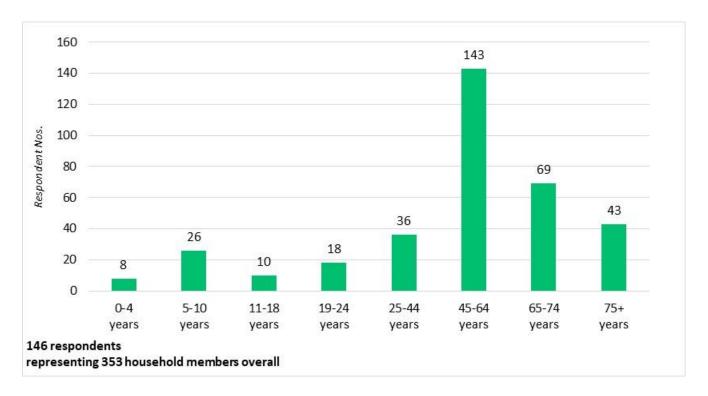


The majority of the respondents have lived in the parish for many years, with 26% having been here for over 30 years. However, a quarter are relative new arrivals, demonstrating that there is a reasonable level of population turnover.



Q3 How many people in each age group live in your household? (please place a number in the relevant boxes)

Answered: 146 Skipped: 1



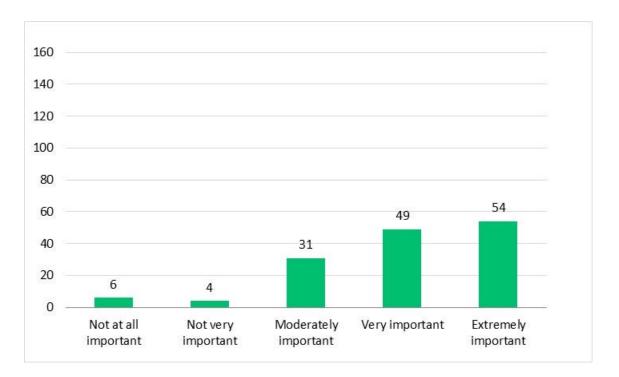
The parish is very heavily skewed towards middle aged/older aged, and this has increased over time. This situation, possibly reflecting property prices, will present some long term challenges for the community. Despite this, the number of children has increased, although there are very few teenagers.



The challenges of the Climate and Nature Emergency are serious concerns for the future. To address this, it is going to require positive changes to all our lifestyles. The information gathered from our residents, businesses and other key groups in the parish will highlight what we can all do as a community to help achieve the goal of being carbon-neutral by 2030.

Q4 How important is the climate change emergency to you?

Answered: 144 Skipped: 3

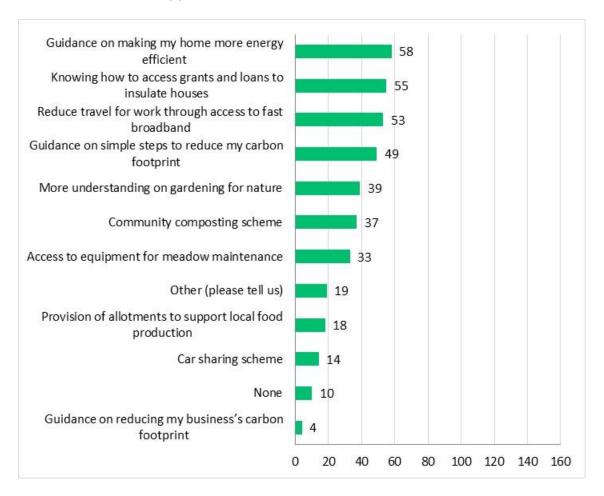


Clearly a majority of the community recognises that issues relating to climate change are highly significant. 134 of the 144 responses state that the climate emergency is either moderately, very or extremely important to them.



Q5 What would help you to reduce your own carbon footprint and help restore nature? (tick any that apply)

Answered: 140 Skipped: 7



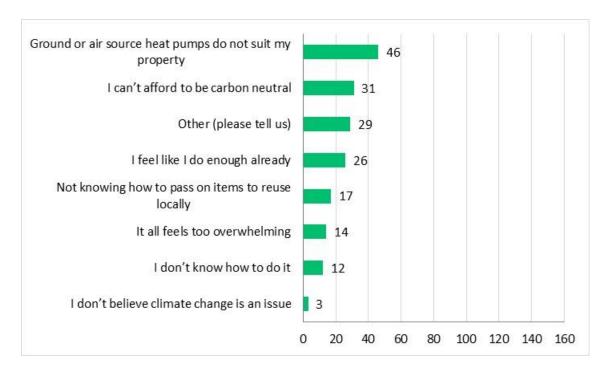
Most of the responses from the 140 respondents to this question relate to the greater provision of information and guidance on what we can do as individuals to improve the climate situation by making homes more energy efficient (58), accessing grants and loans to insulate houses (55) and steps to reduce carbon footprint (49), together with faster broadband to improve home working/reduce travel (53).

A number of comments/suggestions were received as to what we should be exploring as a parish, which included the provision of community green power generation (solar/wind).



Q6 What, if anything, is currently stopping you from being more environmentally friendly? (tick any that apply)

Answered: 122 Skipped: 25

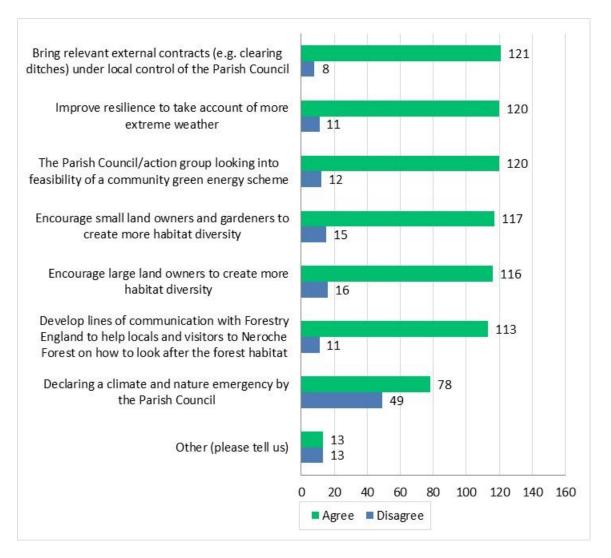


Most people appear to be trying to do something, but comments suggest that a lack of information, time or money are restricting people from taking greater action.



Q7 Some of the actions on climate change and to increase biodiversity are likely to involve changes in the parish. Do you agree or disagree with the following changes?

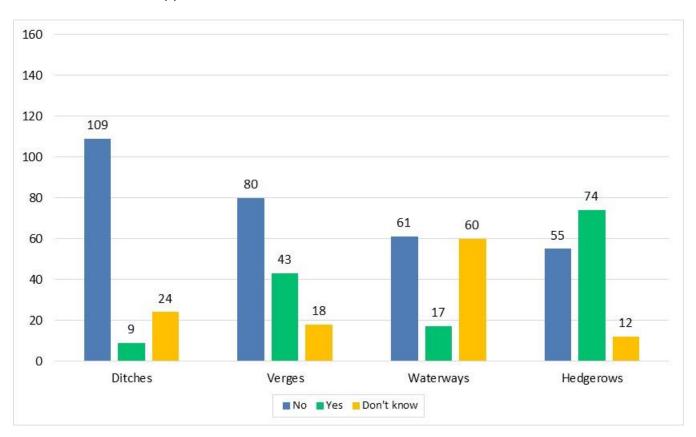




All of the suggested actions proved to be well supported by the 142 respondents to this question with 6 of the suggested action receiving between 113 and 121 ticks each. This shows there is a clear mandate for the Parish Council to be more proactive in these areas, be it directly, or indirectly via action groups (with the Parish Council acting as a co-ordinator/facilitator). The issue of ditch clearance is a common theme throughout the survey.

Q8 Are the following well maintained?

Answered: 143 Skipped: 4

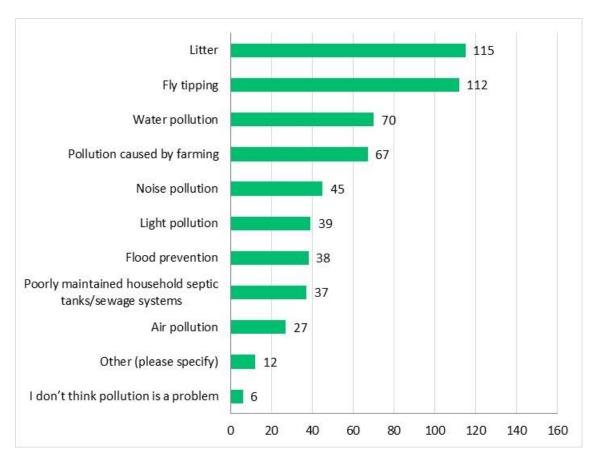


There is clear concern over the maintenance of ditches (109 of 143 respondents) and verges (80), with comments about the implications of poor maintenance being well recognised (flooding in many locations, increased road maintenance needed for potholes, reduction of natural habitats etc.). There is also a lack of clarity as to who is responsible for ditch maintenance – the local authority or the landowner?

Although a majority of respondents felt that hedgerows are well maintained, there is a clear conflict between being practical and concerns for protecting natural habitats, as typified in one comment: "Accepting hedgerows must allow for visibility, most could be better managed for nature. Likewise, verges, where wild flowers could be encouraged".

Q9 Are you concerned about any of the following issues relating to your local environment in the parish?





Litter and fly tipping were seen as the greatest issues by the 143 respondents. Water pollution is seen as coming from *'run off'* from farms, although it cannot be ascertained whether this is perceived or real.

Q10 If you feel that fly tipping/litter is a problem in the Parish, where does it often happen?

Answered: 107 Skipped: 40

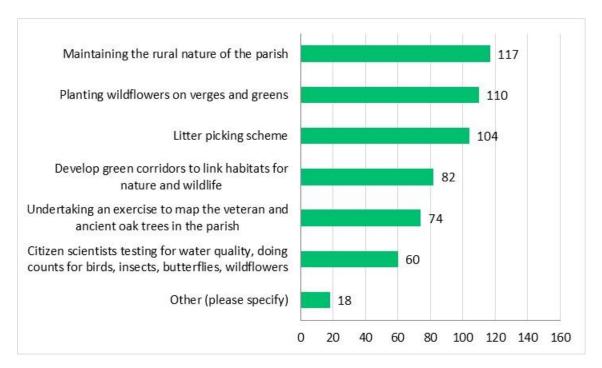
The main locations were as follows:

- At key wood entrances/parking areas
- On the road between Curland and Horton
- Bickenhall Lane/New Rd
- On the road between Staple Fitzpaine and Taunton

References were also made to rubbish being dropped by the recycling operation.

Q11 Would you like to see any of the following initiatives in the Parish? (please tick any that apply)

Answered: 141 Skipped: 6



The parish is a beautiful rural area and it is clear that respondents wish to keep it that way. It is why people live and remain here for many years. All of the options listed proved popular and need to be explore

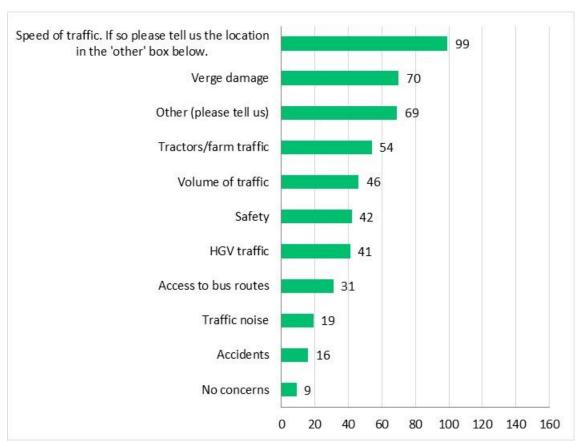


Traffic, Travel and transport

Cars are essential for many people in rural areas, but to address the challenges of congestion and climate change, we can look to improve the provision of public transport, and encouraging walking and cycling, to reduce car journeys.

Q12 If you have concerns about the local traffic, please tick the top three issues in the Parish which currently affect you?

Answered: 145 Skipped: 2



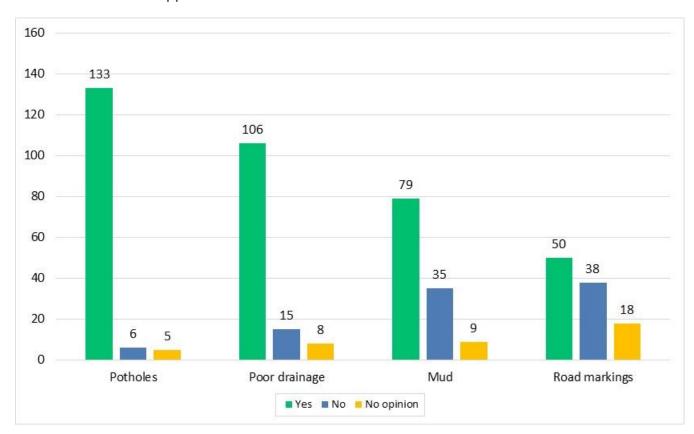
Traffic speed is clearly seen as a significant issue across the parish and was identified by 99 of the 145 respondents, together with verge damage (70). The speed 'hotspots' identified include:

- The crossroads at Staple Fitzpaine
- Between Badger Street and Winterwell, especially where the road narrows and at the bends
- Staple Hill down to the Bulford bend
- New Road, between Bickenhall and Staple Fitzpaine
- Thurlbear Road

These 'hotspots' are consistent with those highlighted in the 2010 Neroche Parish Plan, reflecting the fact that improvements have not been made. A number of comments were also made relating to the size of farm machinery, including: "huge tractors and trailers and slurry trailers speeding around blind bends" and the damage caused to road verges.

Q13 Are you concerned about the condition of the local road surfaces?





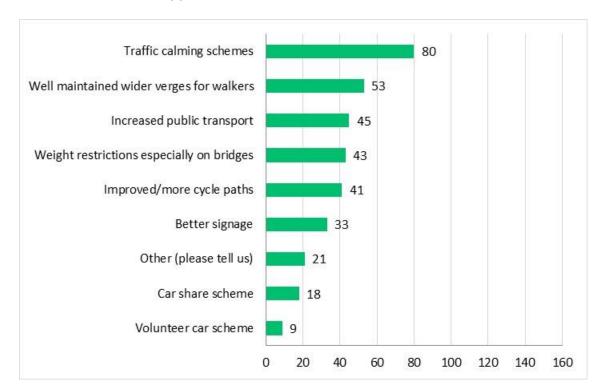
The increase in the number of potholes in local roads is well known and is seen by virtually all respondents as a major issue (133 of 146 respondents). Some of this is linked, rightly or wrongly, to farm vehicles and HGV's – "deep rutting caused by HGV/farm vehicles". The tipping lorries are especially highlighted as believed to be causing road damage.

Mud on roads is a classic example of the difficult balance between the fact that Neroche is a rural parish - and so tractors on roads will be a regular occurrence, (and at certain times of the year they will deposit mud on roads, which is to be expected) - and road safety. Therefore, it is only where any mud becomes excessive that it becomes a concern. The comment "mud is an issue at certain times but we live in a farming area" reflected the views of many respondents.



Q14 What do you think are the best ways to reduce traffic problems in Neroche Parish? (tick any that apply)

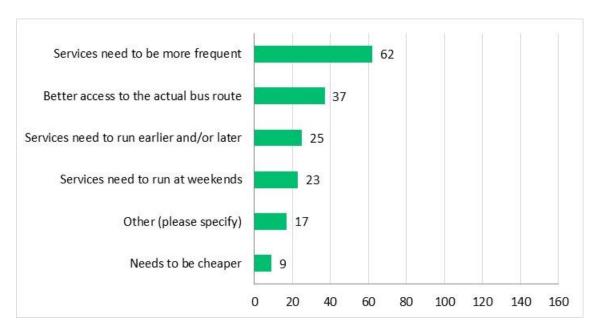
Answered: 135 Skipped: 12



Traffic calming (speed reduction) is identified as the main way (80 of 135 responses) to reduce traffic issues in the parish (see Q. 12). Other improvements were highlighted by 53 or fewer respondents. There were some comments relating to the proposed dualling of the A358, which is not popular "Highways England should leave the A358 as it is except for the bypass at Henlade". However, people proposed both more and less access to it locally (also see Q16).

Q15 What if anything would encourage you to use the bus service more often? (tick any that apply)

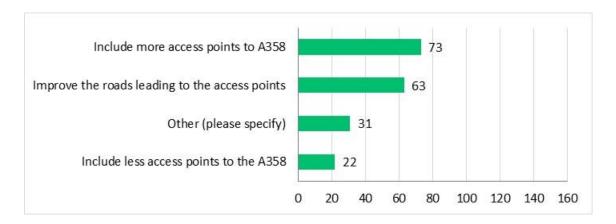
Answered: 97 Skipped: 50



There is no doubt that the bus service is valued. However, most respondents (62 of the 97 respondents) would, somewhat inevitably, like to see it becoming more frequent, although it is acknowledged that this is unlikely to happen.

Q16 What can be done to manage any impact on local roads of the proposed A358 upgrade?

Answered: 127 Skipped: 20

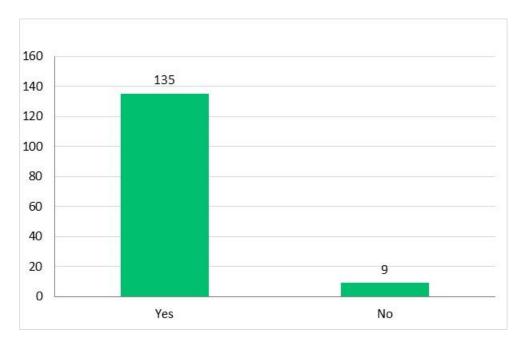


The A358 dualling project is highly unpopular, with the exception of improvements at both ends. There is clear concern that its implementation will have an impact on the level of traffic using local roads across the parish. A majority would like to see more access points than currently proposed, and there is a concern that those proposed are unsuitable, often involving single track lanes.

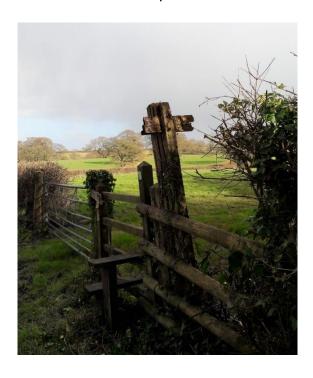


Q17 Are Rights of Way important to you?

Answered: 144 Skipped: 3

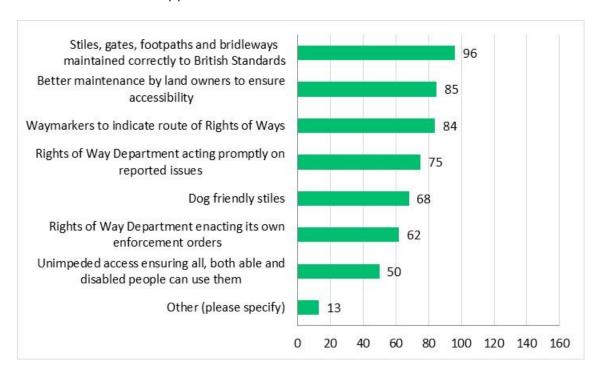


The importance of rights of way received the most positive endorsement across the entire survey, with virtually all respondents (135 of 144) viewing rights of way as important, reflecting the rural nature of the parish.



Q18 What would improve your experience of using Rights of Way? Please tick all that apply

Answered: 131 Skipped: 16



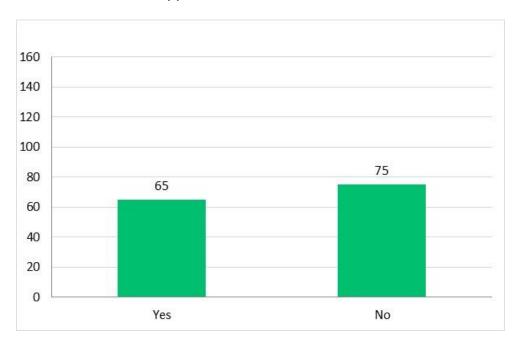
Despite the very high level of engagement with rights of way, there is clearly some dissatisfaction when they come to be used. That is, they can be improved in a number of ways – properly maintained (96 responses), suitable stiles, better signage etc. Specific comments included: "An important part of the fabric of our community that need to be kept and maintained". "There are too many blocked RoW's in the parish. Also, dangerous stiles not maintained by landowners".

There is also a view that the enforcement of rights of ways issues need to be enforced more effectively (62 of the 131 respondents).



Q19 Do you know how to report Rights of Way issues?

Answered: 140 Skipped: 7

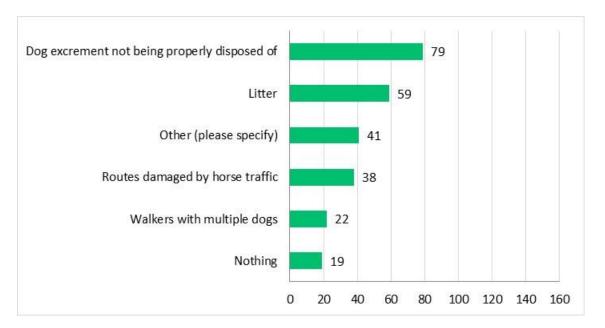


Over half (75 of the 140 respondents to this questions) are not aware of how an issue with a right of way can be reported. This clearly needs to be addressed.



Q20 What, if anything spoils your enjoyment of using Rights of Way? Please tick any that apply.

Answered: 137 Skipped: 10



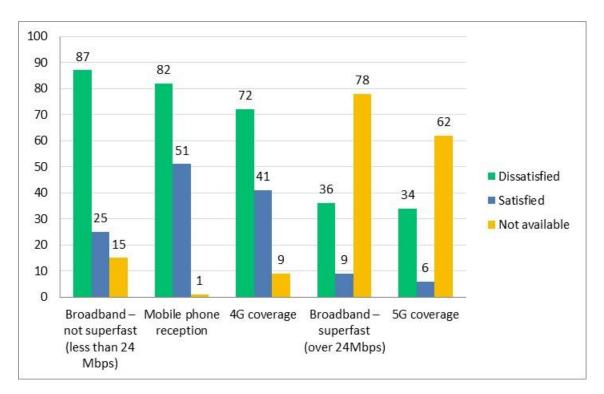
The greatest issue impacting the use of rights of way is the whole area of dog waste (79 of the 137 respondents highlighted this). This presents potential health issues and matters of cleanliness etc. Dog waste needs to be collected in poo bags and then disposed of appropriately. For example, comments included "Can be a terrible amount of dog poo along the path that leads to Middleroom Wood, opposite Forest Drove. I had to stop taking my children there". "Dog walkers dutifully picking up dog poo and then leaving hedges 'decorated' with poo bags".

Broadband and Mobile

Internet access and mobile phone coverage is seen by many as an essential part of life, especially as people are choosing to work from home but to date, provision in rural areas has been patchy. Your experience of internet and mobile usage will allow us to explore how we can develop this provision.

Q21 Are you satisfied with the technology where you live?

Answered: 139 Skipped: 8



Not surprisingly, respondents remain dissatisfied with the level of mobile phone coverage - 82 of the 139 respondents to this question, the slow speeds (less than 24 Mbps) 87 respondents. There is frustration with the lack of high-speed broadband – 78 respondents stating it is not available and a further 36 being dissatisfied. Comments included: "Mobile phone doesn't work indoors". "We work with a broadband speed of 0.5 to 5Mps, with frequent dips and crashes".

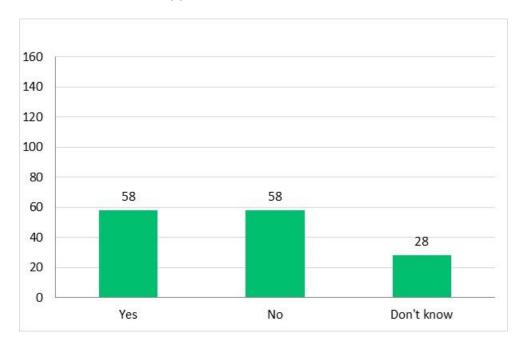


Housing

This overview of your needs and current housing situations will help inform the decisions made by the Parish council on planning applications for both large and small developments. Please not this is not a housing needs survey so will provide indicative information only.

Q22 In the next 10 - 15 years would you like to see small numbers of homes built in Neroche Parish?

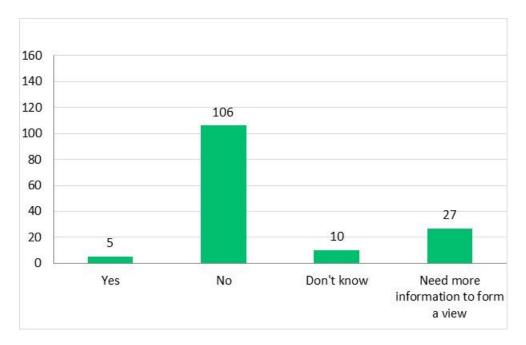




Inevitably, the building of new properties is a contentious issue, with the need to satisfy a growing demand on one hand, with the desire to protect the rural nature of the parish on the other. The parish is equally split on this issue – of the 144 responses 58 would like to see small numbers of homes built and 58 would not. A further 28 'don't know'.

Q23 Would you support any future housing development on Orchard Portman land owned by Taylor Wimpey?

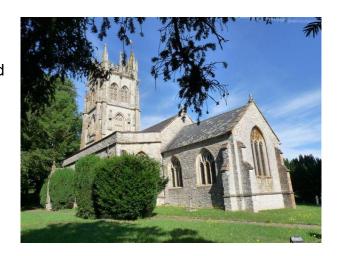
Answered: 144 Skipped: 3



The development of land in Orchard Portman owned by Taylor Wimpey is clearly opposed by the vast majority of respondents (106 out of 147), although some would need more information in order to come to a conclusion (27) and 10 'don't know'.

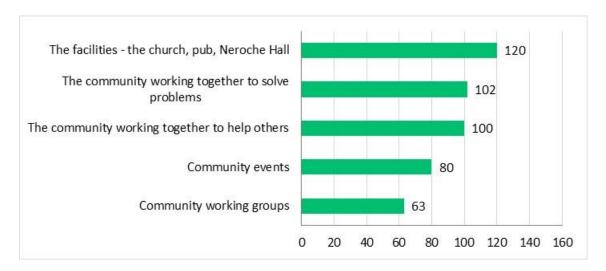
Community and Social Activities

We have a number of community facilities in the parish by that we mean buildings, equipment for recreation and places to assemble for meetings, events and social gatherings. These questions have helped us understand whether the facilities are suitable for the community, where improvements are needed or if new facilities are needed



Q24 What do you think are important factors contributing to parish life? Tick all that apply

Answered: 137 Skipped: 10



The answers reflect a strong sense of community within the parish, with current facilities valued by 120 of the 137 respondents, and a desire to work together to make a difference.



Q25 Neroche Hall is designed to be used as a community facility. Along with existing events and clubs that take place at Neroche Hall what else would help you to engage and feel a sense of belonging with your community?

Answered: 110 Skipped: 37





There is a sense from the comments that Neroche Hall already provides a good range of events, although the idea of hosting a repair shop was well received by 70 of the 110 respondents. For example, "Happy with things as they are" was a regular theme respondents commented on.

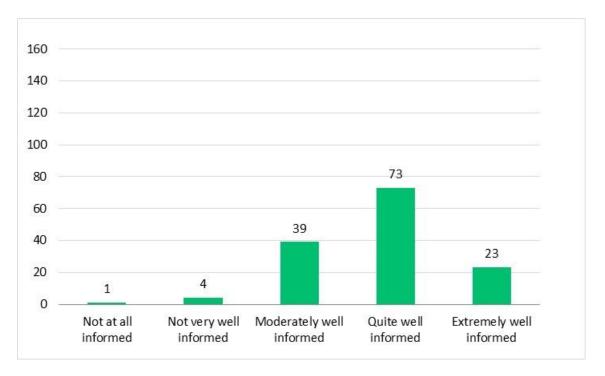


Communication

We wanted to find out which methods of communication are used to find out about what activities and events are going on in Neroche as well as how people keep up to date with Parish Council matters and anything around local business and commerce. Findings will now help us improve our methods of communication and ensure that we communicate with the whole community effectively.

Q26 How well informed do you feel about activities and events in Neroche? Answered: 140

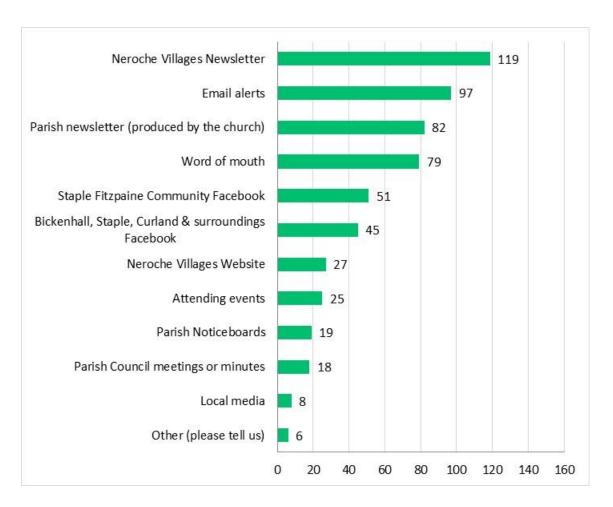
Skipped: 7



Communication of events in Neroche appears to be effective, with most respondents claiming to be at least quite well informed (73 of the 140 respondents) and a further 23 feeling extremely well informed.

Q27 How do you find out about what's going on in Neroche? (tick any that apply)

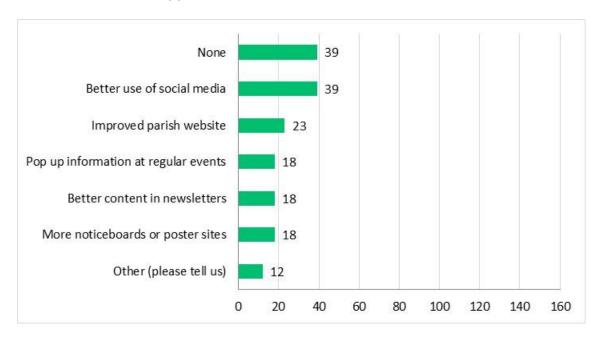
Answered: 143 Skipped: 4



The Parish Newsletter (119 of 143) and community email alert (97) (both introduced as a result of the last Parish Plan in 2010), together with the church Parish Magazine (82), are the most common sources of information. Social media is used by a smaller proportion of respondents. The Neroche Villages website and parish notice boards scored poorly.

Q28 What improvements could be made to keep you informed about local news? (tick any that apply)

Answered: 122 Skipped: 25



Comments suggest a level of satisfaction "happy with it as it is, thank you, email alerts are excellent!" (Q. 27)

However better use of social media and improvements to the parish website would be appreciated. "Parish notice boards are badly in need of maintenance...Old notices needs removing" commented one respondent.



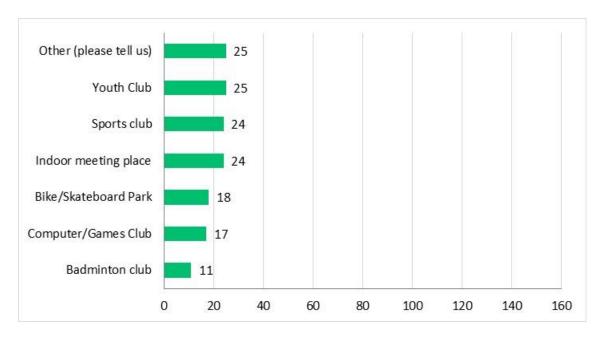
Medieval bell from All Saints Church Curland, displayed at Museum of Somerset

Children and Young People

We want to offer children and young people in the Parish or who visit the Parish the best possible services so we can provide families an enriching experience. Having your opinions on current services and facilities now enables us to plan future services for children and young people.

Q29 Would the children and young people use any of the following facilities if they were to be provided in the parish? (tick any that apply)

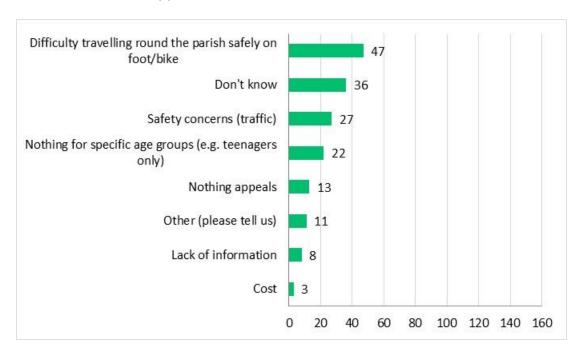
Answered: 67 Skipped: 80



As highlighted in Q3, there are relatively few children living within the parish. However, some form of club/meeting place would be welcomed.

Q30 Is there anything that prevents children/young people from engaging in activities more generally? (tick any that apply)

Answered: 93 Skipped: 54



The number of respondents to this question is greater than the number of people who have children. Therefore, the responses are likely to be perceived rather than definitely actual, and they relate to the ease/safety of travel to activities.

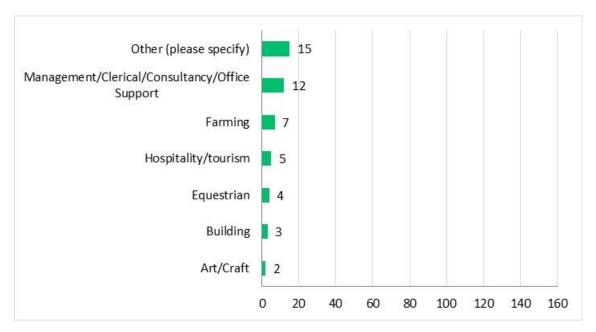
Businesses

Business has changed over the last couple of years and how and where it takes place has been particularly affected by Covid. These results will encourage a thriving business community that is supported and maintained in the Parish.

Please **ONLY** complete these questions if you run a business based in Neroche Parish, are self-employed or work from home. Otherwise please continue to Question 34.

Q31 What kind of work do you do?

Answered: 48 Skipped: 99

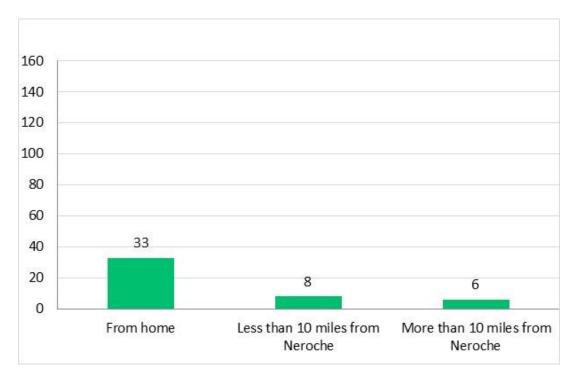


The number of respondents was relatively low (48 out of 147), possibly reflecting proportion of retired people and that others work outside the parish. It should be noted that, although the parish is in a rural location and surrounded by farms, agriculture does not employ many people in the parish.



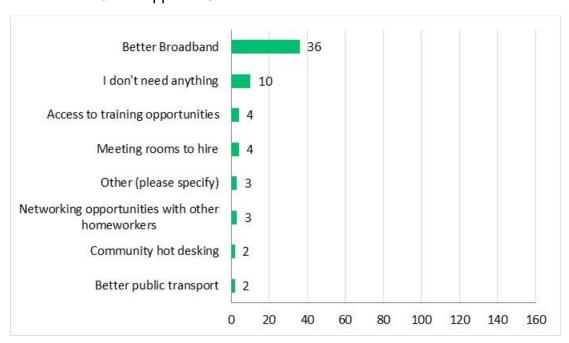
Q32 Where do you work?

Answered: 47 Skipped: 100



Most respondents work from home.

Q33 If you work from home what would help improve this experience? Answered: 46 Skipped: 101

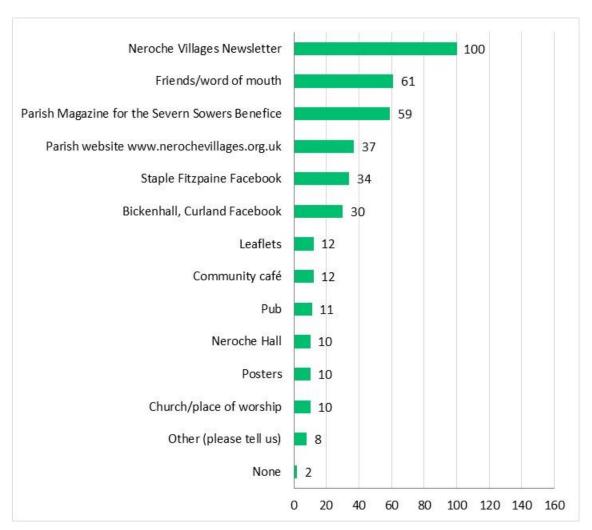


The only requirement of note from those working from home is, not surprisingly, improved broadband.



Q34 How do you find out about Parish Council matters? (tick all that apply)

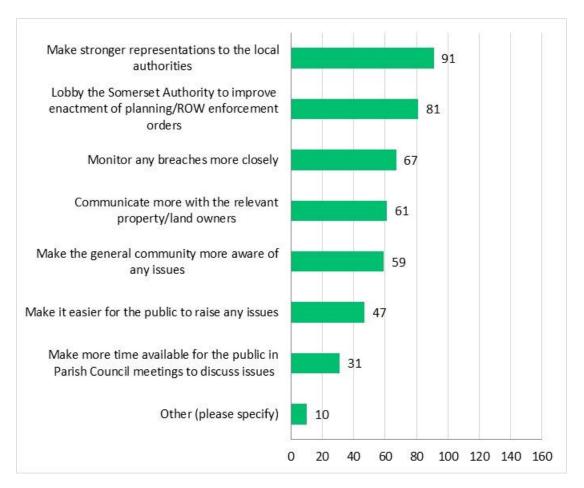
Answered: 138 Skipped: 9



The most popular ways of receiving information on the Parish Council are the same as for communication in general (Q 27). However, 'word of mouth' is also quite high (61 of 138), which carries the risk of misinterpretation.

Q35 What should the Parish Council do in order to enable any breaches of planning regulations or Public Rights of Way usage to be resolved? (tick any that apply)





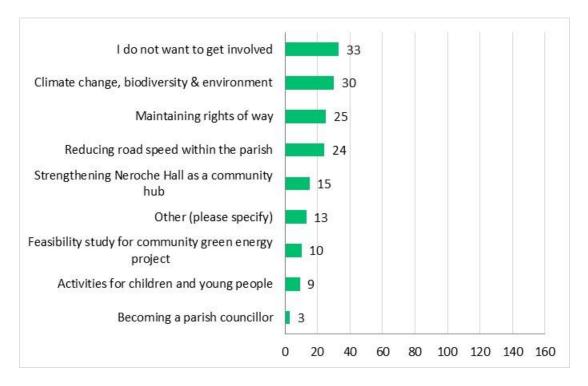
Clearly, respondents would like the Parish Council to be more pro-active in these areas – Comments that reflected the general feel of respondents included: "Act – less talk more action, please". "Lobby that enforcement by Planning and RoW must be improved".

However, it needs to be recognised that the authority of the Parish Council is relatively limited.



Q36 Would you like to get involved in strengthening our community by being part of a group working on any of the following? (Please tick any that apply)





It is a positive sign of a good community spirit that a number of respondents (69 of 102 respondents) are willing to get involved with various community improvement projects.

Q37 If you would like to be contacted to be part of a working group or to be kept informed about the Community Review by the Future Neroche project please opt-in to receiving communications by supplying your email address



Answered: 47 Skipped: 100

Conclusion

The Neroche Community Review indicates a community where the rural nature of the parish is greatly valued. It identifies that major concerns relate to: the environment and nature, traffic volumes and speed, robustly maintaining our Rights of Way and maintaining community life.

Residents would welcome a more proactive Parish Council while recognising the need for local people to step forward to become involved in community activities. Working together the Parish Council and parishioners can strengthen and improve the quality of our lives alongside that of our local environment.

With thanks to all who took part in the survey and the focus groups, the Greyhound Inn and all those who contributed photos of the parish. Thanks also to the team at Smart Communities Ltd for their support and advice.



Bluebell time at Britty Common

Privacy Statement

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Future Neroche entered any paper copies using standard proprietary online survey software and signed a nondisclosure agreement to protect your personal data. Once entered all paper copies were destroyed.

Digital copies are retained for 12 months and deleted after this period. Any personal data that is captured is anonymised with the report and held securely for the purposes of analysis.

No data has been published which can identify an individual without their consent. If you entered your details to take part in the prize draw and you won, your data was shared with Future Neroche.

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