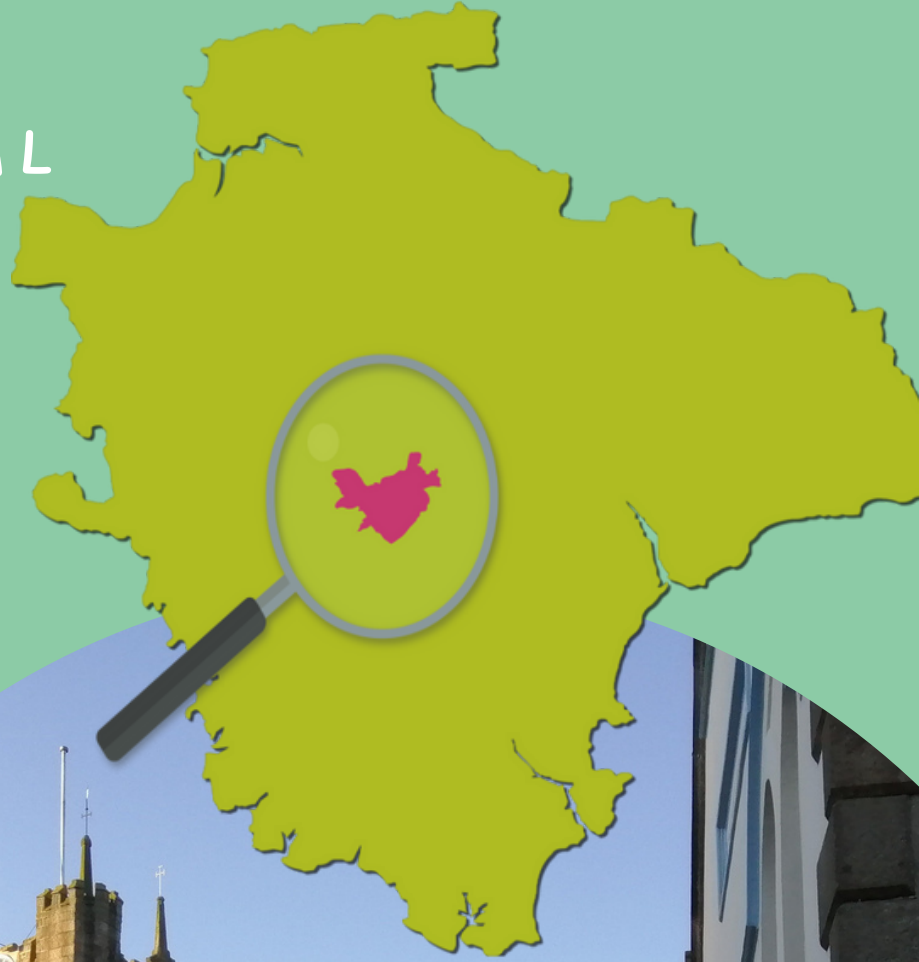


Okehampton

PROFILE OF ASSOCIATIONAL LIFE

Completed: February 2022



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Would you like to make any comments or queries, about this PAL? Contact: insights@devoncf.com

PALs are compiled by the DCF Community Insight Team whose job it is to develop networks and connections to better support people in Devon.

To find out more about the work of DCF, visit: www.devoncf.com

What is a PAL?

A Profile of Associational Life, or PAL, provides a snapshot of what the social fabric in a place-based community looks and feels like. Communities operate in networks of public buildings and spaces, formal and statutory organisations, informal community-based societies and clubs, workplaces, reciprocity, mutual obligation, trust and the social cohesion that comes from history of a place and how the people who live there do things together. PALs map out what is available in a community and collects stories and feelings from people who live or work there.

PLEASE NOTE: PALs cannot cover absolutely everything about a community. Community information changes rapidly and some information may be out of date. If you are involved with a community organisation and would like to take the information in this PAL and keep it updated on your website/noticeboard etc then please feel free to do so!

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INTRODUCTION

Okehampton is a town and civil parish in West Devon, on the northern edge of Dartmoor. Its population at the time of the 2011 census was 7,647. The town is 21 miles (33 km) west of Exeter and 23 (37km) miles east of Launceston. The town lies within the local government district of West Devon Borough Council.

The name comes from the River Okement, which flows through the town. Like many other places in the Westcountry, Okehampton originally grew on the medieval wool trade. It was during this time that Okehampton Castle was built and the feudal barony of Okehampton was established, becoming the largest medieval fiefdom in Devon. Today the remains of Okehampton Castle are a popular English Heritage visitor attraction, set among woodland above the River Okement.

Thanks to its position, Okehampton is known as the “gateway to Dartmoor” and one of the walking centres of Devon. Walking routes including the Two Castles Trail, Tarka Trail, Granite Way and the West Devon Way to Plymouth are all easily accessible from the town centre. Residents and visitors can also enjoy cycling, horse-riding and a range of other outdoor pursuits in and near the town. [The Museum of Dartmoor Life](#) is in the centre of town and holds a collection exploring more than 5,000 years of life on Dartmoor.

Okehampton Camp is an army training camp on Dartmoor which can be reached via Okehampton. It is used by a variety of military and cadet training units. The Camp is also the base for the [Ten Tors challenge](#) run by the army each year in early May.

Okehampton seems to have retained much of its unique character and, according to the [draft Okehampton Town and Hamlets Neighbourhood Plan 2019-2034](#), 90 per cent of retailers are small, independent shops, alongside a handful of



Introduction Contd.

supermarkets and high street chains. It is also a Fairtrade Town. While the prevalence of independents would suggest they are well supported by local people, business owners did talk about challenges in terms of attracting enough customers. And although the town is growing there was a feeling that this was not translating into increased footfall in the town centre, as people living in new housing developments on the outskirts of Okehampton tend to travel to Exeter, Launceston or Crediton for their shopping.

A daily passenger rail service to Exeter was re-opened in November 2021, almost 50 years after the original line was closed. The new Dartmoor Line provides train services between Okehampton, Crediton and Exeter St Davids. It is the first line to be reinstated as part of the Department for Transport's "Restoring your Railway" initiative and its opening was a significant moment both locally and nationally. It is hoped the new service will boost the local economy and provide better access to work and education for the people who live in and around Okehampton. Although the rail line is largely seen as a positive development, some people we spoke to questioned whether it might end up taking people out of the town rather than bringing them in.

A number of small towns, villages and settlements make up the wider Okehampton area. These include:

- Beaworthy
- Belstone
- Bondleigh
- Bratton Clovelly
- Bridestowe
- Broadwoodkelly
- Chagford
- Coryton
- Drewsteignton
- Exbourne
- Germansweek
- Gidleigh
- Hatherleigh
- Highampton
- Iddesleigh
- Inwardleigh
- Jacobstowe
- Kelly
- Lands common to the Parishes of Bridestowe and Sourton
- Lewtrenchard
- Lifton
- Marystow
- Meeth
- Monkokehampton
- North Tawton
- Northlew
- Okehampton Hamlets
- Sampford Courtenay
- Sourton
- South Tawton
- Spreyton
- Sticklepath
- Stowford
- Throwleigh
- Thrushelton
- Winkleigh

COMMUNITY EVENTS

Okehampton Carnival takes place on the third Saturday in October every year and includes a Children's Procession and an Evening Procession.

Okehampton Show is a traditional agricultural show which is held at the Stoney Park showground. It includes livestock, food and drink, crafts and entertainment.

The annual Rotary Club May Fair is held in Simmons Park, with various stalls and entertainment and the popular duck races on East Okement River.

Okey Music Day – a day of free music events, due to return in July 2022.

There is a general market every Saturday in Red Lion Yard.

Okehampton Edwardian Evening is a popular event that takes place on the first Thursday of December. Businesses stay open for late night shopping and entertainment includes the Mayor's Carol Service, reindeer in Red Lion Yard and a barrel organ playing festive tunes.

Okehampton Festival of Food and Music is held on the last Saturday in June, bringing local food and drink producers and street food vendors to the town, along with musical performers.

Everything Okehampton organises some of these events for the community and details can be found on the Visit Okehampton website.



DEMOGRAPHICS



With an IMD (Index of Multiple Deprivations) ranking of 4738 out of 12382, where one is the most deprived, Okehampton is a relatively deprived community compared to others in the county and nationally. As in other places in Devon, these statistics can hide pockets of deeper need. A [2009 Joint Strategic Needs Assessment](#) from NHS Devon and Devon County Council found that Okehampton's rural hinterland is more deprived than the urban centre, and much more deprived than the Devon and England averages for rural areas. The assessment identified particular issues around access to housing and services, living environment and education.

The 2011 census found that around a quarter of adults in Okehampton have no qualifications, although figures on [Devon County Council's Communities](#) pages show GCSE performance is above the Devon average. The proportion of lone parents was also relatively high (20 per cent) at the time of the 2011 census. And unemployment in Okehampton was at 5 per cent, compared to 2.8 per cent across Devon.

Facts & Figures: Okehampton

IMD ranking: 4738 out of 12382

Working age poverty: 9.9%

No qualifications: 24.6%

Social housing: 12.6%

Lone parents: 20.5%

Ethnic diversity: 5.1%

Unemployed men: 6%

Unemployed women: 4.1%

Demographics Contd.

As in many other Devon communities, ethnic diversity is low, with 98 per cent identifying as white in 2011. The average age was 42 and the 2009 Joint Strategic Needs Assessment mentioned previously found that the birth rate is above the Devon average, particularly in the urban centre. Teen conception rates were above the Devon average in Okehampton East.

According to crimedata.co.uk, Okehampton has a slightly lower rate of crime than Devon as a whole, with 48 crimes per 1,000 people in 2020 compared to 51 per 1,000 people across Devon. Policing priorities at the time of writing were speeding, connectivity with the community and disrupting antisocial behaviour.

There are many families who have lived in the town for generations – they know everyone and are often closely involved in community activities. We also spoke to people who had moved to Okehampton more recently but felt well-embedded. However, it was mentioned more than once that people who live in new housing developments on the outskirts of the town seemed to be more cut off. Some of these residents apparently never come into the town itself, as it is quicker for them to drive to Crediton, Launceston or Exeter. It was felt that it was harder for them to build their own communities or become part of the wider Okehampton community.



PUBLIC SERVICES & TRANSPORT

Okehampton lies on the main route from London to Cornwall and, until the A30 was rerouted to bypass the town in 1988, it became a bottleneck in the summer. While those holiday tailbacks are largely a thing of the past, traffic remains an issue in the town centre.

As mentioned previously, a regular rail service between Okehampton, Crediton and Exeter St Davids reopened in November 2021. The Dartmoor Line was providing a two hourly service at the time of writing, but this was due to be increased to hourly during 2022. The journey time to Exeter is about 40 minutes while the journey to Crediton takes 25 minutes. The station is located about a 15 minute (uphill) walk from the town centre. It was unstaffed at the time of writing but there were plans to renovate the building, with a new café, community shop, visitor centre and toilet facilities. There is also an aspiration to build another parkway station at the east end of town.



Okehampton is served by various bus services from Exeter, Bude, Launceston and Tavistock. Stagecoach South West service 6 links from Exeter bus station via Exeter St Davids to Okehampton and then to Bude. Other services from Exeter bus station include the 6A service via Exeter St Davids, which continues to Launceston. There is a bus to Exeter roughly every one to two hours and the journey takes about 50 minutes. Routes can be found [here](#).

A new bus service was also launched to coincide with the reopening of the railway line. Service 118 links Tavistock to Okehampton, via Mary Tavy and Lydford, providing a connection to the rail service. The buses run hourly and there is a flat fare of £1 for those travelling from Okehampton town to the station and a maximum fare of £3, single or return, for passengers on the 118 who have a valid rail ticket.

Okehampton District Community Transport Group provides a ring and ride service along with individual journeys and outings.



Public services & transport contd.

The town has one surgery – Okehampton Medical Centre - and one dentist - {my}dentist. One resident told us that it was very difficult to access dental care locally and she travelled to another town to see a dentist. Okehampton Hospital is a community hospital providing services such as audiology, podiatry and maternity.



There is a post office on George Street and the library on North Street provides services such as free computer access and IT support, along with activities including Bounce and Rhyme, Lego club, a reading group for adults and knit and natter.



The police station does not have a public reception and the nearest stations open for public enquiries are in Exeter or Plymouth. One resident who has lived in Okehampton most of his life said they regularly used to see police out on the beat and there was a good relationship between residents and police officers. Now he felt there was little police presence or community engagement.

There is an on-call firestation on North Road.



TOWN COUNCIL

Okehampton Town Council has 14 councillors, representing two wards (north and south). It is based at the Town Hall on Fore Street. The council has responsibility for facilities including Simmons Park, the skatepark, car parks, the cemetery and some rights of way. The council chamber and committee room are available for hire. Charter Hall is also owned by the council and can be hired for events.

Councillors hold monthly surgeries where members of the public can speak to a councillor about issues or concerns. At the time of writing they were trialing a booking system for this and appointments were available either face to face or via Zoom. The council also publishes a regular newsletter and has an active Facebook page. And they hold coffee mornings once a month at Charter Hall.

Council grants of up to £500 are available for groups and organisations that benefit Okehampton.

Our overall impression was that the council was seen as supportive and active. However, there was a feeling from some that there was a core group of people – not necessarily part of the council - who had lived in the town for generations and held a great deal of influence. As a result, it was suggested that new ideas or approaches were often shut down or dismissed.

Okehampton Hamlets is a rural parish surrounding Okehampton town and has its own parish council, with eight councillors. The parish covers around 15 square miles and had just under 700 residents at the 2011 census. While the councils are separate their proximity means they impact on one another and it was mentioned that they do not always work together as effectively as they could. At the beginning of 2022, for instance, a small row erupted when the parish council turned down a request from the town council to contribute to the cost of maintaining the town's public toilets. The town council's view was that, as people from the Hamlets use the toilets, they should contribute to their upkeep. However, the Hamlets council responded that the toilets were not its responsibility and it needed to prioritise its own parish services.



COMMUNICATION

The Okehampton Times is a weekly newspaper which comes out on a Thursday.

Oke Links is a bi-monthly magazine delivered to households and businesses in the area. The Dartmoor Links website incorporates information from all the Links magazines, which also include Moor Links, Tavy Links and Plym Links.

As mentioned above, the town council publishes a newsletter, which is available in paper form and on the council website. The council also has information about community organisations on its website.

West Devon CVS has produced In Touch At Home Oke with details of support and services available locally.

There are large noticeboards and stacks of leaflets in the Ockment Centre, which produces its own What's On leaflet and makes information available on its website. Leaflets and posters are on display at the library, which also has files containing community information. Other smaller noticeboards are dotted around the town with shops and businesses displaying some information about community events and groups as well.

Facebook groups include Okehampton Information Hub (7.7k members) Okehampton Noticeboard (5.7k members) and Okehampton Community Information (2.5k members).



EDUCATION

Okehampton has two primary schools – Okehampton Primary School and St James CofE Primary and Nursery School. Both have preschool provision. There are also a number of smaller primary schools in villages around Okehampton.

Okehampton College provides secondary education for children in the town and the surrounding area. It also offers A Levels and Post-16 vocational qualifications.

All three schools within Okehampton are part of the Dartmoor Multi Academy Trust. The trust has been appointed to run a new Special Educational needs school for the area which is due to be built on land within the Okehampton East Business Park.



ENVIRONMENT

Simmons Park is the town's main green space, encompassing woodland and riverside walks, meadows and formal gardens. Facilities within the park include a bowling green, bandstand and children's adventure playground. A leisure centre is also located in the park.

Fairplace Sensory Garden is a small garden on St James' Street. Okehampton Town Council manages the park and garden and has produced a leaflet with maps for both and tips for enjoying them.

Okehampton Community Garden is a space open to anyone who is interested in growing their own food. There are drop in gardening sessions on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday as well as regular community events.

Growing Our Future is another community garden project based at the Eco Hub in the grounds of Okehampton College. It works with scientists, artists, gardeners and the



Environment Contd.

community to share skills and give local people hands-on experience of working on the land, using sustainable techniques such as permaculture, agro forestry and organic gardening. Growing Our Future have been working with Harvest Workers Co-op to develop the Eco Hub. Harvest Workers is a non-profit cooperative that grows and sources organic food for its farm shop in Okehampton and also creates opportunities for the community to explore food and farming through workshops and events.



Okehampton United Charities manages three allotments sites with a total of 70 plots.

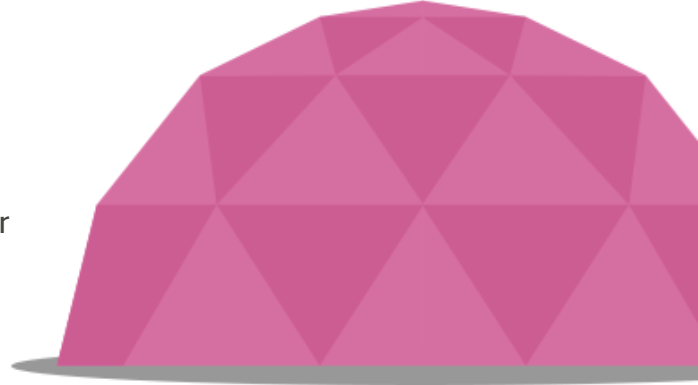
The Old Town Park Nature Reserve is on the south of the West Okement River and has been designated a local nature reserve. It is open to the public all year round.

As already mentioned, Okehampton has direct access to Dartmoor National Park and is a starting point for people to explore the moor on foot, bike or horseback. Local young people can learn about the moor and get involved with caring for it through the Junior and Youth Ranger schemes.



COMMUNITY HUBS

The Ockment Centre has low costs rooms available for hire, these are used for a range of meetings, community activities and social events. The reception area is full of information about what is on at the centre and elsewhere in the town, and staff and volunteers are on hand to answer any questions. The centre runs a work club twice a week and Citizen's Advice is based here. They also have a community garden.



The Pavilion in the Park is run by Okehampton Community and Recreation Association (OCRA). It provides rooms and sports facilities to hire, including an all weather pitch and grass sports pitches. A wide range of Okehampton's sports and exercise clubs and groups are based here. There is also a café onsite and space for artists to exhibit work.

The Eco Hub offers an indoor space for groups to use as well as the community garden.

Okehampton Community Kitchen, based at No. 3 East Street, provides a breakfast club for school children and a drop in coffee morning for anyone in the community who feels isolated. They also offer their downstairs space to community groups free of charge. And they run a suspended coffee scheme where people "pay it forward" by buying an extra coffee for someone in need.

A number of community groups often hold coffee mornings on a Saturday at Charter Hall. Many of the town's churches have space available for use by the community and run activities such as youth groups and Lego Church. The library provides a place for people to meet, take part in activities and seek support.



COMMUNITY GROUPS

Arts, culture and heritage

- West Devon Art Workshops – affordable art classes, courses and workshops.
- Okehampton Community Dance Project – a non-profit event dance group that aims to bring the community together through dance, music and fun.
- Wren Music – a community folk arts organisation that provides access to musical experiences for people across Devon. This includes open access choirs and orchestras, free Instrument Picnic sessions for under fives and workshops in care homes.
- Okehampton Choral Society.

Community support and development

- Okehampton United Charities provides grants to groups and individuals in Okehampton town and Okehampton Hamlets. Its education arm, Okehampton Education Foundation, makes allocations to Okehampton College and Okehampton Primary School and for under-25s to support them in post-16 education, apprenticeships and further education. The charity also provides two almshouses and manages three allotment sites in Okehampton. And it can provide individual crisis grants. Many of the local groups and organisations have received grants from Okehampton United Charities, enabling them to support local people and provide activities for free or subsidised. At the time of writing the charity had just purchased 33 acres of local land to protect it from development and maintain it for future generations.
- Community Links – a CIC providing support services for families and individuals including counselling, a neurodiverse parenting support group, mental health group and befriending. Their music centre provides affordable music lessons for young people, encouraging more to get involved with music.
- West Devon CVS – supports voluntary groups, charities, social enterprises and other not-for-profit organisations across West Devon. They also help individuals find volunteering opportunities.
- Rotary Club of Okehampton – provides financial and other support for community organisations.
- Lions Club of Okehampton and District – members aim to help those less fortunate than themselves locally, nationally and internationally.
- All Together Okehampton – a community group to bring people together in Okehampton. Still recently formed at the time of writing but it had received National Lottery funding for various community activities and events.

Community groups contd.

Crime and Safety

- Okehampton Street Pastors – part of a national team of trained volunteers who patrol the streets on Friday and Saturday nights to help and listen to people who are out and may need assistance.

Dementia and Memory Loss

- The Forget Me Not Café – for people with memory loss and their carers. Suspended at the time of writing due to Covid.

Disability

- Okehampton Parkinson's Café – friendship and support for people with Parkinson's and their families and carers.

Education, learning and training

- OASA (Okehampton and Surrounding Areas) Home Education – a group for home educators to get together on a social basis.
- Okehampton Forest School – various outdoor groups and activities, including a toddler group, home education groups and holiday clubs.

Emergency

- North Dartmoor Search & Rescue Team
- Okehampton Coronavirus Support Group – volunteer led support and sign-posting
- Oke PADS (Okehampton Public Access Defibrillators) – raises money to install defibrillators in public spaces and provides free training for the public on how to use them.

Employment

- Okehampton Work Club – a free service based at the Ockment Centre and open to everyone. Free computer use and support with CVs, interview technique and confidence building etc.



Community groups contd.

Environment

- Okehampton Community Garden – aims to bring people together to support and encourage gardening of all kinds, especially the growing of food. Hosts various events and activities at the garden.
- Okement Rivers Improvement Group Okehampton (ORIG) – a registered charity and voluntary group that works to look after the Okement rivers through activities such as river bank clearing, pollution monitoring and riverbed restoration.

Families/parents/lone parents

- Okehampton Baptist Church Baby and Toddler Group
- La Leche League Okehampton – peer support for pregnant and breastfeeding women. Meets monthly.
- Okehampton Who Let the Dads Out – weekly sessions for dads and their children to meet other families and enjoy activities together. They link up with the local Men in Sheds to develop intergenerational relationships and skill-sharing. They also have an area at Okehampton Community Garden and do outings such as kite-flying when the weather allows.



Community groups contd.

Food

- Harvest Workers Co op – a not-for-profit co-operative that sells local, organic produce from its shop in Okehampton and runs educational activities connecting people with food and growing. Family workshops are held on the fourth Saturday of the month at the Eco Hub. It provides weekly fruit and veg bags for Okehampton Foodbank and milk through the Milk Project with Bridestowe church for families who would not otherwise be able to afford it. Other projects include regular cooking sessions in partnership with All Together Okehampton. Harvest Workers Co-op has produced a webpage showing all the food and wellbeing projects in Okehampton which can be found [here](#).
- Okehampton Community Kitchen distributes food to people in need in the community through a range of initiatives. These include meal packages sent out to households in the community, a free breakfast club and a hot meal for children on a Friday. They host a drop in coffee morning for people who may be isolated and run life skills sessions for young people, teaching them basic recipes and then providing them with everything they need to make the recipe at home, with enough to make one for themselves, another for a neighbour and a third to donate back to the kitchen. Bench Buddies is another Community Kitchen scheme, where volunteers go out into the community with hot drinks and homemade biscuits to chat to people on their own and encourage people to make connections. They use donated surplus food wherever possible to reduce waste and keep costs down.
- Okehampton Food Bank – based at Okehampton Baptist Church. The foodbank is open on a Friday morning or food parcels can be delivered.
- Plans for a community fridge were being developed at the time of writing and a public meeting was due to take place to discuss where it could go and to drum up volunteers to look after the fridge.

Health and wellbeing

- Okehampton Walk and Talk
- Okehampton Community Wellbeing for All – complementary therapies and practices in Okehampton and online.

Hobby and skill share

- Okehampton and District Local History Society
- Okehampton Photographic Group
- Sew Sewsial Morsbag Pod – a chance for sewers to meet up and make reusable Morsbags – these can be kept or given away to reduce the use of plastic bags. Meets at No.3 East Street.

Community groups contd.

Housing and homelessness

- Simmons Homes manages 13 almshouses in Okehampton which are available to residents of Okehampton and Hamlets who are in need.
- Okehampton United Charities has two almshouses for people in need.

Learning disability

- Get Changed Theatre Company – theatre group for adults with learning disabilities in West and Mid Devon. Projects include weekly workshops, major productions and smaller-scale events and are designed to help those taking part increase their confidence, improve their wellbeing and develop transferable skills while challenging public attitudes and raising the profile of the disability community.

Men

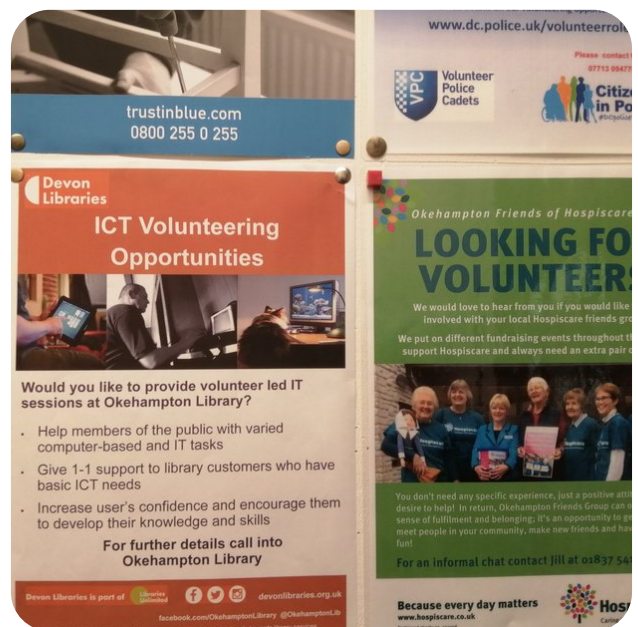
- Men in Sheds – a place for men to socialise, work on projects and share skills. The shed was open three times a week at the time of writing. Based at Okehampton Community Garden.

Mental health

- Tor Support – free professional counselling for young people aged 5-25 in Okehampton and surrounding parishes. Volunteer opportunities.

Older people

- Okehampton U3A – groups and activities covering a range of activities for those no longer in full-time work or raising a family.
- Friendly Circle – for anyone over the age of 55. Meets the first Thursday of the month at The Charter Hall. Meetings are advertised via posters around the town.



Community groups contd.

Sports and leisure

- Okehampton Community Recreation Association – a charity that aims to maintain and develop sporting and recreational opportunities for children and adults in the Okehampton area. They are the focal point for most sports in the town and deliver a wide range of activities as well as managing college land and facilities outside of college time. Activities available include walking football, hockey and netball, a Sporting Memories group for people with dementia and SNAP (Special Needs Activities in the Park) a social group for children and young people with special needs. Their facilities at the Pavilion in the Park are available to hire and they also run the Pavilion Café.
- Okehampton Rugby Football Club – teams for men, women, juniors and seniors.
- Okehampton Hockey Club – teams for men, women and juniors.
- Okehampton Netball League
- Okehampton Running Club – five groups, each of a different ability.
- Okehampton Otters Swimming and Lifesaving Group
- Okehampton Cycling Club – welcomes members of all abilities.
- Okehampton Smallbore Club – three indoor shooting ranges catering to a range of disciplines. Includes facilities for the visually impaired.
- Okehampton Table Tennis Club – an active club with eight tables and a full time coach.
- West Devon Swords – fencing and historical swordplay sessions.

Transport

- Okehampton District Community Transport Group – Ring and Ride buses, community car service and community bus trips.

Women

- Gilead Foundation – a supported living service for women who have had a range of experiences including addiction, anxiety, homelessness and domestic abuse.

Young people & children

- Room 13 – Youth club run by SPACE. Regular club nights for Juniors (Years 7 and 8), Inters (Years 9 and 10) and Seniors (Years 11 to 13) alongside additional sessions such as forest school and Couch 2 5K. There is also targeted provision available to offer additional support for those who need it.
- 2443 Squadron Royal Air Force Air Cadets
- Okehampton Volunteer Police Cadets
- Mary Budding Trust – funding and equipment for children with additional needs in Okehampton, Tavistock and surrounding towns and villages.

INDUSTRY & ROUTES TO EMPLOYMENT

According to the 2011 census, the industries local people predominantly work in are wholesale and retail trade, human health and social work, manufacturing and accommodation and food services. The highest percentage of men work in wholesale and retail trade while the largest proportion of women work in human health and social work.

More than 300 jobs were lost in the town in 2011 when Robert Wiseman Dairy closed and frozen desserts firm Polestar laid off 232 jobs within the space of a couple of weeks. It was a heavy blow to the community but there has been some growth and investment since. Later that same year National Bee Supplies expanded and moved to the former Robert Wiseman Dairy plant. And in 2018 pet food business Forthglade opened a 70,000 sq ft factory on the new Okehampton East Business Park. Okehampton Business Centre has also been developed on land next to the business park. This provides meeting and conference facilities and is the home of Business Information Point (BIP), which offers free small business advice and workshops.

Anecdotally we were told that there is a lot of self-employment locally and some of these people had been hit hard by the pandemic. Rebecca at the Community Kitchen said she was supporting people who may appear relatively well off on the surface but had found themselves unexpectedly launched into severe financial hardship. Rebecca had also identified a “really worrying increase” in people not claiming Universal Credit because they couldn’t cope mentally with the complexities of applying and the risk of being penalised. She said this was a particular issue for those with fluctuating incomes.

As jobs are limited in the town many people commute to Exeter or elsewhere for work. The draft neighbourhood plan describes Okehampton as functioning as a “dormitory town” for Exeter and anticipates that this will increase as the railway opens up accessibility for more commuters.

The rail line also seems to have sparked debate around business opening hours. Many of the local businesses only open from around 10am to 3pm and there is a feeling from some quarters that if they extended their hours they would attract more customers, especially with the train bringing more people to the town. However, some business owners told us that footfall was low even during their current opening hours and they couldn’t afford to stay open for longer. Opinions also varied as to whether tourists arriving by train would venture into the town or head straight off onto the moor.



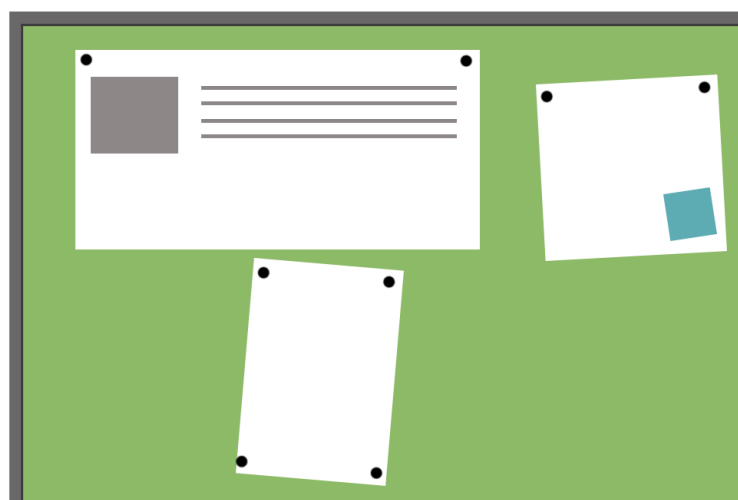
COMMUNITY COMMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Okehampton has some strong community assets and a lot of people working actively to support the town and enhance the lives of those who live there. The funding that Okehampton United Charity is able to provide for local initiatives is a valuable resource that has helped projects to flourish and there doesn't seem to be a shortage of activities of all kinds for people to get involved with if they wish. "It's not sophisticated but it's very real," said one person. "For a small rural town that doesn't historically have great wealth it holds its own."

Unsurprisingly for a small rural town there are also tensions and differences of opinion. And it can take a while for those moving into the town to feel fully part of the community, especially if they live on one of the new housing developments. It seems that making connections with certain key figures within the town helps, but there is then perhaps the risk that people and groups without those connections feel excluded and ignored.

Traffic congestion is a real issue and was mentioned by nearly everyone we spoke to, including the town council who said they were working with Devon County Council on how to improve the situation. Small businesses in the centre of town are particularly affected as it is often quicker for people to drive out of Okehampton to a nearby town to do their shopping. Another common concern was that the town's infrastructure and services were not keeping pace with its growth in population.

Problems with antisocial behaviour came up a couple of times, although this seemed to be relatively minor and mainly involving young people with not much else to do. One shop owner said there had been instances of shoplifting. While not a particularly big problem he suggested that more engagement from the police would help to address the issue before it escalated. He added that the college had been responsive and helpful.



Community Comments and Opportunities Contd.

There was excitement about Immersion, a new virtual reality centre which had launched the month before we visited and holds gaming sessions, clubs and tournaments. It was felt this could provide much needed entertainment for young people who weren't interested in the other activities on offer, which largely centre around sport and outdoor pursuits. And it was seen as a sign of confidence in the town as a place of opportunity. However, we were also told that young people still tend to move away for better jobs and wages.

Although there is a range of support available from various sources there were still concerns that people fall through the gaps or do not reach out for help when they need it. Older residents are often isolated and the pandemic has only exacerbated this. Early years education has also been identified as a particular need. There is no children's centre in the town and it has been noted that children are not as well-prepared as they could be when they start at school.

While residents were honest about Okehampton's challenges they expressed a real attachment to the town and a pride in what it has to offer. The strength of the community was also evident. "People help each other," one person said. And the reopening of the railway line has brought a sense of new possibilities for the town and the people who live there. It will be interesting to see how that develops over time.

