

Nicholforest is situated in Carlisle district in Cumbria, on the border with Scotland. The parish has a population of 370 spread across several small hamlets: Bushfield, Catlowdy, Kershopefoot, Penton, Scuggate, Stoneygate and Warwicksland.

Local services include a church, pub, and village hall, with the nearest shops being seven miles away.

Background

Community Exchanges are defined as regular community-led events that:

- Bring people together, particularly people who might not otherwise meet
- Provide access to services and information
- Reduce social isolation

With funding from North West Together we Can and NHS Cumbria, ACT had supported a number of Community Exchanges to set up, and promoted the idea to halls across Cumbria with a written toolkit and video case studies.

In 2010 Nicholforest Village Hall Committee received information from ACT. With many older residents living on their own and limited opportunities to get together, the committee found the social aspect of an Exchange particularly attractive.

The committee also wanted to make the most of the improved facilities at the hall since major refurbishment in 2004.

The Project

Whilst initiated by two volunteers in the Village Hall Committee, eight additional volunteers were recruited to help with preparing food, setting up and serving.

A grant from North West Together We Can, administered by ACT, helped the group to purchase tablecloths, kitchen equipment, aprons, promotional A-boards, and leaflets.

Nicholforest Exchange at Penton opened in October 2011, running from 1pm to 4pm on the last Wednesday of every month.



Nicholforest Exchange volunteers with Margaret Robb, 'Book Drop' volunteer

It's important that the Exchange is self financing. Affectionately known by locals as the 'Soup Kitchen' it offers a selection of home made soups and hot desserts, with tea and coffee for £5 a head.

Those coming each month can order meat from a local butchers, and vegetables, to collect at the Exchange. Pies and other produce is also available to buy on the day, many taking them home for their evening meal.

Local people have stalls selling cards, gifts, jams, chutneys and other local produce, and there is a books and jigsaw exchange.

Cumbria County Council Libraries Service provide a volunteer run 'Book Drop' at the Exchange which has seen an increase in the number of people joining the library. Bags of baby toys are also available to swap.

The Benefit Advice Service and other support organisations have also visited to provide information and advice on a range of issues.



Nicholforest Exchange at Penton



Borrowing books at the Book Drop

What has been achieved?

The Exchange regularly attracts between 50 and 60 people each month. Many are older residents, however, visitors have ranged from 6 months to over 90 years old.

The feedback has been extremely positive, with many people looking forward to coming every month. Special occasions such as Christmas are particularly popular, everyone received a Christmas cracker, mince pies and a piece of cake from Santa.

The success of the Exchange has attracted more support and involvement from local authorities including the setting up the Book Drop and regular visits from local councillors.

The project is self financing with any profit being invested in new equipment. 10% of sales from the butcher get donated back to the Exchange. Volunteers making soups and desserts are reimbursed for double the cost of ingredients.

Half the people who come each month are from surrounding parishes, helping to build a wider sense of community. People get to know about other local activities and events.

The Learning

“It’s one of the best things we’ve ever done!” said coordinator Anna Robinson.

Look at what other communities have done and learn from them. The group learnt from other Exchanges but also made it their own. Once a month is manageable, with the number of volunteers here.

Continuity is really important, the Exchange runs every month, only moving the date once when it was going to fall on Christmas day.

Having asked if people wanted the food to vary, everyone said they were happy to keep the choice of soups and desserts the same, as it is only once a month. This helps the volunteers have a routine, but they also keep on thinking about how to improve things.

Initially there was a hairdresser and other mobile services but these are also available to visit people in their homes, which is preferred, so didn’t continue at the Exchange.

Contact Details

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