Climate Emergency in Devon: Local Councils' current responses and support needs

Devon Communities Together, March 2021

1. Introduction

Devon Communities Together (DCT) has been an active member of the Devon Net Carbon Zero Task Force since May 2019. Following up on interest from several Local Councils, who enquired about support available for action around the climate emergency, including interest in the potential for developing a support network in 2021, Devon Communities Together (DCT) collaborated with Local Councils to design a survey. After a first draft had been created, further input in designing this survey was gained from DALC's County Committee and 2 additional local councillors representing rural parishes who had begun developing a climate action plan.

The intention of the survey was to:

a)   Better understand the existing positions and actions of councils across Devon
b)   Better understand the range of needs and support desired by councils across Devon
c)   Better understand the appetite for establishing a county wide network for councils to support one another

The survey was distributed via direct email to all 422 parish councils in Devon. Originally planned to be live from 14.12.2020 – 14.01.2021, the deadline for responses was extended to 01.02.2021 to allow for time for council meetings. 107 survey responses were received from 97 local councils.

This report first shows the demographics of respondent parishes, before looking at the current perceived awareness of the climate emergency. It then looks at the support needs identified, followed by the current action being taken by, and within, parishes across Devon. Additional comments which arose in response to these questions are then explored, before a concluding discussion.

2. Key findings

2.1 78.5% of respondents are seeking further support in addressing the climate emergency, with the majority of those not requesting further support representing parishes with a population of less than 500.

Comments by these respondents indicate that they are not currently seeking support due to small rural parishes not being clear on how they can take action, or if there is value in them taking action.

2.2 43% of respondents expressed interest in having representatives at a county network, with 50.5% seeking further information, and only 6.5% not interested at this stage.

There is general demand for both local and county wide learning networks, although there is a preference for local learning networks, especially amongst those from rural locations. There is a desire for a network to not just be a talking shop or to reinvent the wheel, but to be a space for sharing practical information and expertise.

2.3   The main areas of support requested by survey respondents are around:

> »   **Community engagement and consultation to develop future plans 49.5%**
>
> »   **General awareness raising and communications 42.9%**
>
> »   **Support in creating baseline analysis of relevant environmental issues 41.9%**
>
> »   **Baseline analysis specifically on CO2 emissions in their community 36.2%**

2.4   There is significant demand for all areas of support, with answer choices and comments covering specialist topics (such as energy efficiency, environmental management, community ownership models, and neighbourhood planning), as well as signposting and fundraising support.

2.5

> »   **94.4 %** (101 respondents) identified a need for action
>
> »   **68.2%** (73 participants) of councils who responded indicated they have already started taking action on the climate emergency
>
> »   **18.6%** have started developing an action plan.

The most common actions being undertaken are:

"considering topics relating to sustainability in a parish, town or neighbourhood plan" (46 responses);

"started awareness raising communications amongst our community" (37 responses);

"formed focused working groups to address topics/actions" (27 responses).

2.6   Comments indicated a range of specific actions within communities (such as providing energy saving advice, tree planting, upgrades to hall insulation, electric vehicle charging point feasibility studies). Several respondents had planned actions for spring 2020, which were postponed due to the Covid Pandemic.

2.7   Asked about their awareness of other groups in their areas there is, arguably, a pattern showing that the majority of actions currently being delivered on a local community scale are accessible, direct areas of action (e.g. gardening/biodiversity and tree planting; community clean ups/ beach cleans). However, there is a large range of projects covering different scales and areas of the system.

2.8   Participants' comments indicated concerns around:

> »   **The limited resources and potential time requirements of volunteer councillors;**
> »   **Doubting whether the topic is relevant in their smaller more rural parishes, and what action they are capable of, which will create change.**
> »   **The whole-system nature of the challenge and doubts about a how to work best with different levels of government and other stakeholders, with a fear around a continuation of 'business as usual'.**

3. Geographic coverage of survey respondents

3.1 Participants were asked to name their parish, describe the parish geography and indicate the size of the parish population. All 107 participants responded to these questions. Several respondents chose to select multiple descriptions for the geography of their parish, with a total of 176 responses therefore percentages listed add up to more than 100%. Comments left by respondents answering 'other' to this question further indicates that there is overlap in geographical descriptions, or that further classification is necessary to understand the character of a parish, for example:

"We are still a village, but large (5000 people)"

"Town of Historical value"

"Marshland"

"Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty"

"Tourist Centre"

3.2 Fig 1, and the table below, show that responses came from across Devon:

District	No. of individual responses	
East Devon	13	
Mid Devon	16	
North Devon	13	
South Hams	17	
Teignbridge	19	
Torridge	11	
Wast Devon	18	

Figure 1: Location of respondents

While responses came from all sizes and geographical descriptions, the majority of respondents represent rural locations, and smaller populations (with 45.8% representing parishes of <1,000), shown in Fig 3.

Figure 2: Geography of respondents

3.3 Fig 2 shows the geographical description of respondent parishes

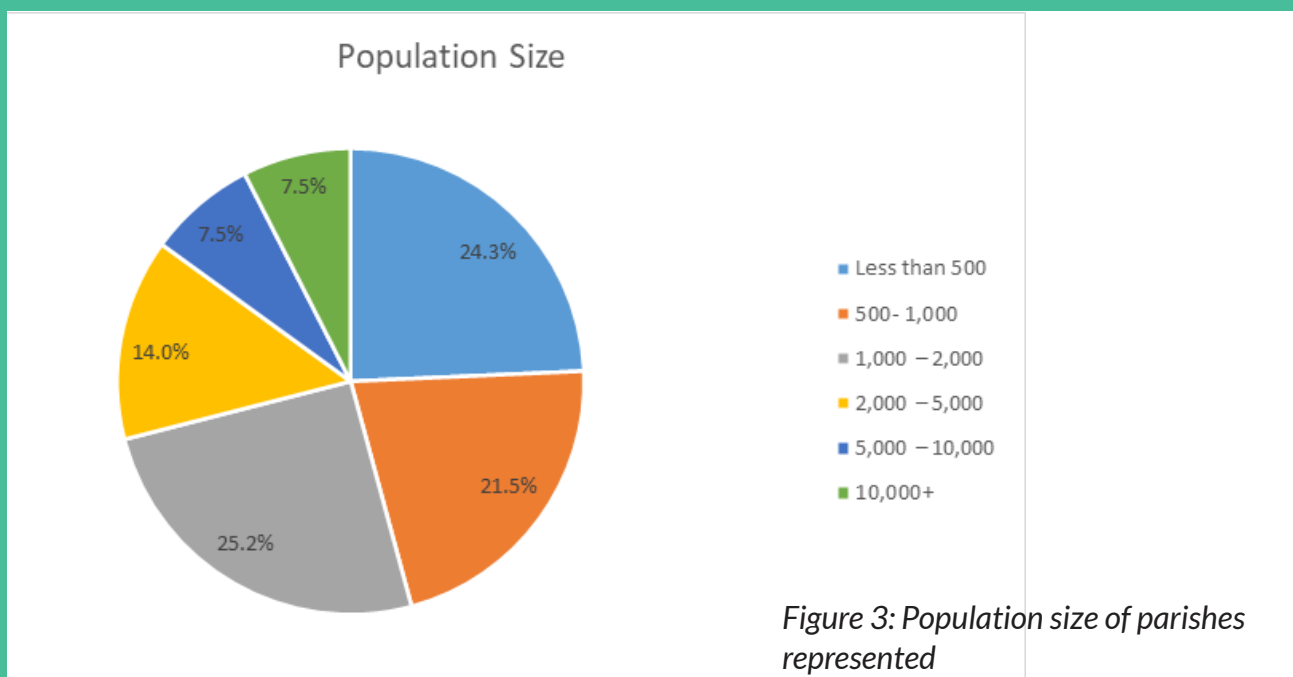**3.4** Fig 3 shows the size of population living in parishes represented.

Figure 3: Population size of parishes represented

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4. Research findings

4..1 Climate Emergency Awareness:

Respondents were asked: *"The environmental emergency can be thought of in distinct, if interrelated, topics. Which of the below topics do you think is of major concern in your community".*

This question received 106 responses with the results shown in Fig 4.

All areas listed seem to be of some concern, with waste reduction being of most concern. However, multiple respondents (8) commented that they could not be confident of their responses being representative of the whole community, and that there is likely different levels of concern in the community. For example:

> **No survey of local residents has been conducted, so this is based on overall impressions. The farming community is generally very concerned about the ecology of the area, however local residents do have significant concerns around the operation of an Anaerobic Digester* - mainly around the volume and scale of traffic movements and consequent damage done to the roads and verges."**
> **Anaerobic Digesters are machines which take sludge, manure, and other organic waste materials and produce methane (natural gas) fuel.*

> **Without carrying out a survey I can only guess at priorities. This is based on action groups within my community"**

> **It is difficult to gauge this across the community. Some are very concerned, some not concerned at all."**

Other comments indicated that the lived experience within an area could impact upon the communities level of concern on a topic. For example:

> **We are facing a great deal of large housing developments that will increase traffic, threaten air quality, rural character and protected wildlife habitats. All these issues and more have been voiced by hundreds in our parish."**

> **We are a small moorland community and some of these issues do not affect us directly. However, many parishioners are concerned about the impacts of these topics on the wider (and global) community."**
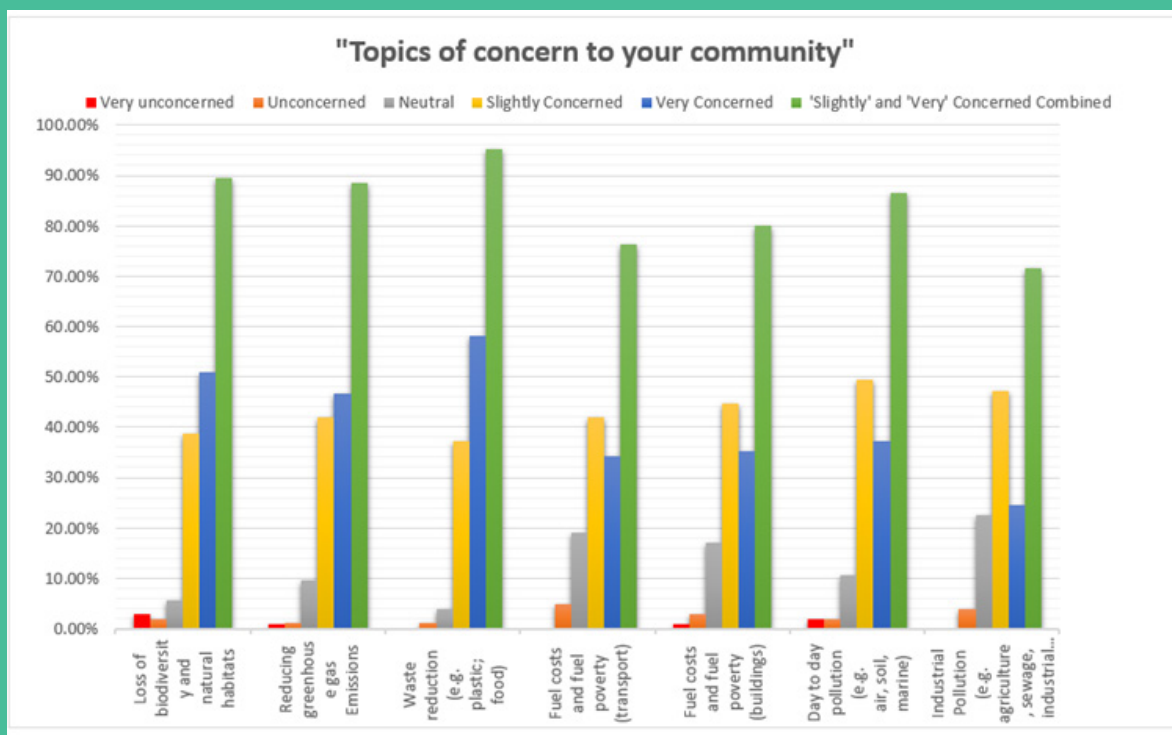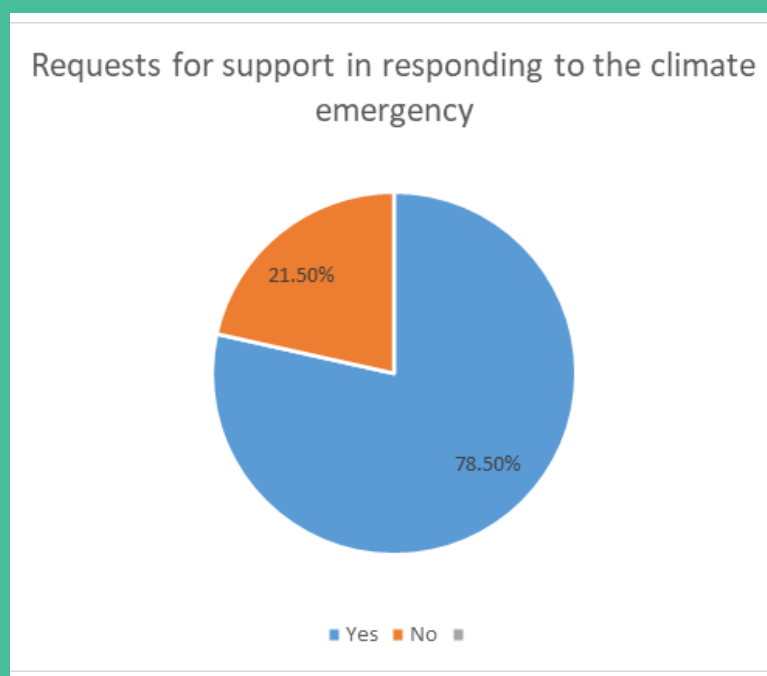
Figure 4: Topics of concern

4.2 Support needs

4.2.1 The survey asked **"Would you like to be provided with further training or support for your community's efforts to address the climate emergency?"**.

All 107 respondents answered this question. Fig 5 shows that the majority of respondents (**78.5%**) seek further support.

It appears that those who said they didn't want support, were more likely to represent smaller population communities in rural locations. Of the 23 who did not request further support or training, **52.2%** of these were from a population of 500 or less and **22.7%** from a population of 500-1,000, compared with **13%** from a population of 1,000 – 2,000 and **13%** from a population 2,000 – 5,000.

Comments by these respondents indicate that they, possibly, do not seek support due to small rural parishes, not being clear on where they fit in the system, how they can take action, or if there is value in them taking action.

Figure 5: Request for support

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4.2.2 101 respondents answered the question **"Please provide detail on what format of training or support would be of most value (tick all that apply)",** (Fig. 6) with several respondents selecting multiple formats.

Local networks (**51.5%**) were preferred to countywide networks (**26.7%**) by respondents as a whole, with this dynamic further emphasised by rural respondents. With **50.8%** from 'Rural Villages' desiring local networks compared to **20.9%** desiring county wide, and a similar finding from 'Rural Countryside' (**51.3% compared to 23%**). However, respondents could select multiple answers, and some respondents may have selected both. **43%** of 107 respondents indicated they would like a representative from your parish to be part of a Devon network of councils supporting each other with topics on Climate emergency and green economy? With **50.5%** not sure and seeking further info, and only **6.5%** not seeking to have a representative (Fig. 7).
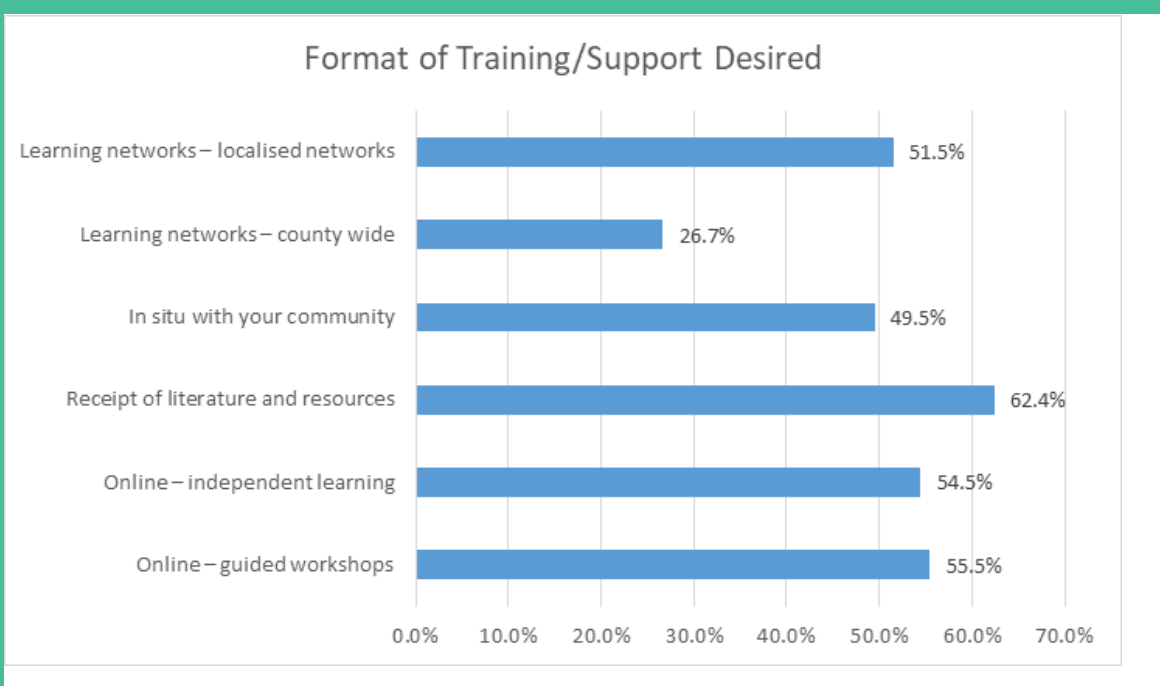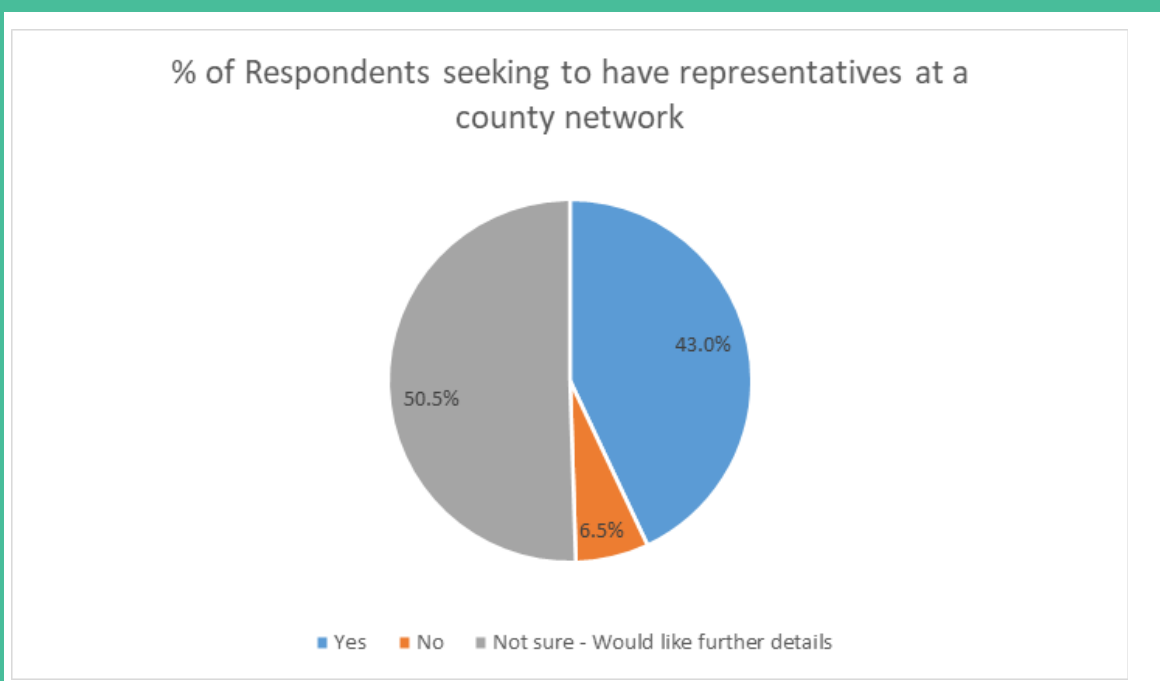

Figure 6 Format of Training Requested

Figure 7: Respondents seeking to have a representative at a county network

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4.2.3 To better understand the specific content of support desired respondents were given a list of 18 areas of support (including 'none of the above') and asked **"Which of the below areas would your parish council be most interested in seeking support on? (Please select up to 8 answers)."** 105 responses were received and are shown below (Fig. 8).

Fig.8 shows a strong desire for support with only 7.6% choosing 'none of the above'. 4 topics received more than 31% and these related to community engagement activities:

» **Community consultation/engagement to gathering input for developing an action plan or creating a community vision for change – 49.5%**
» **Awareness raising and communications" – 42.9%**
» **Baseline assessment activities ('Sustainability Audit' – creating a baseline analysis – 41.9%**
» **Creating a baseline analysis of CO2 emissions in your community – 36.2%**

The remainder of topics received a reasonably even spread of desired support with 8 topics each receiving between **19%** and **31%** and 5 topics each receiving between **11%** and **16%**. Topics receiving less votes perhaps match the early stages at which respondents are in their action on the climate emergency, with **'Community consultation/engagement on an existing action plan'** and **'Evaluation and monitoring of existing/forthcoming projects'** both receiving the lowest percentage of votes with **11.4%.**
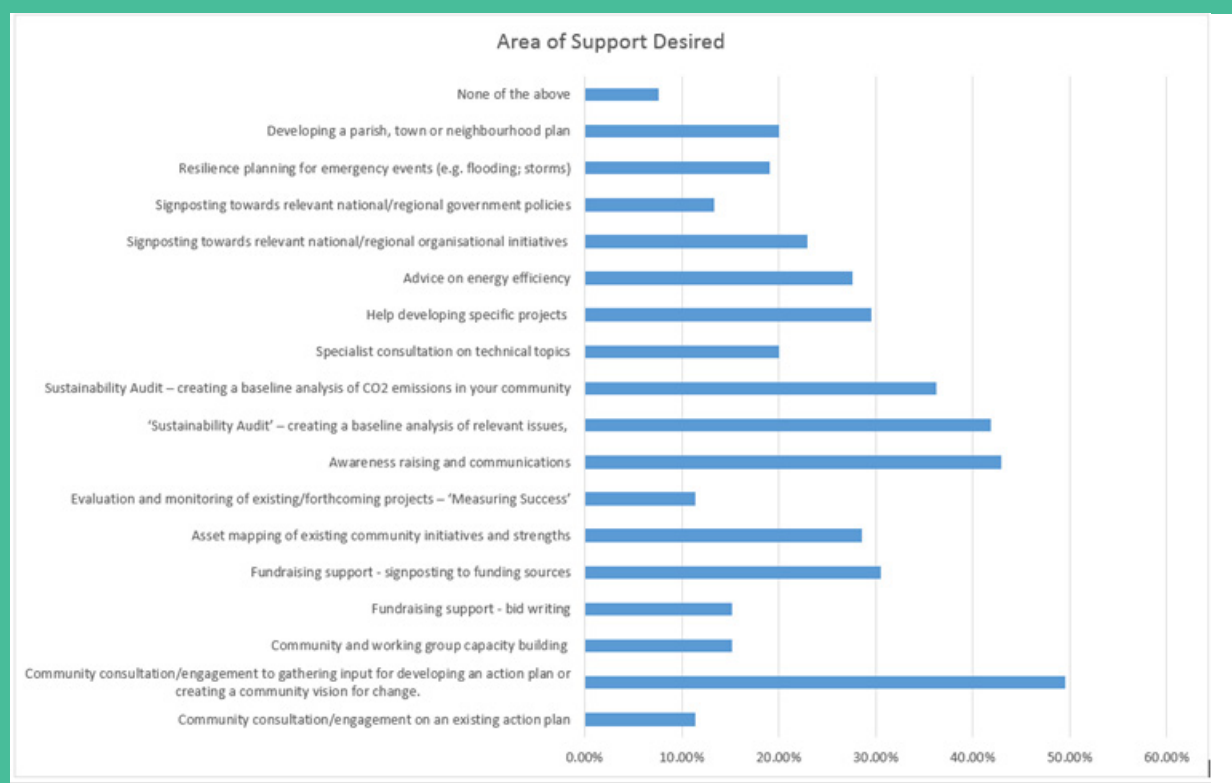

Figure 8: Areas of support desired. NB. Full label options included examples for several options and can be seen in appendix.

33 comments were received to this question, 10 comments noted that all support was welcome and 5 comments expressed the desire for support with community engagement via consultation or awareness raising. Comments also repeated similar concerns as raised in answer to other questions, and which are explored further in Section 4. Other comments expanded on specific areas/topics of

support desired, for example:

> " The Town Council owns a Grade 2* listed building which we would value advice on how it could be made more energy efficient/sustainable use"

> " A local community group is interested in installing a wind turbine in the parish - it's early days, but if this gets off the starting blocks then funding will be required."

> " Advice on possibility of community energy schemes; community ownership offers; land holding community trust."

> " The environmental management of beaches, preservation of wildlife habitat and sustainable tourism are major concerns for us."

> " A series of definitive methods to measure CO2 emissions at different levels within the Parish that we can use for monthly and annual monitoring."

4.3 Current stage of addressing climate emergency

4.3.1 107 respondents answered the question **"What stage would you say your parish council/ organisation is at in addressing the climate emergency?",** the results are shown below (Fig. 9). **60.8%** of respondents have started taking action in some form, with only **5.6%** not identifying a need for action.
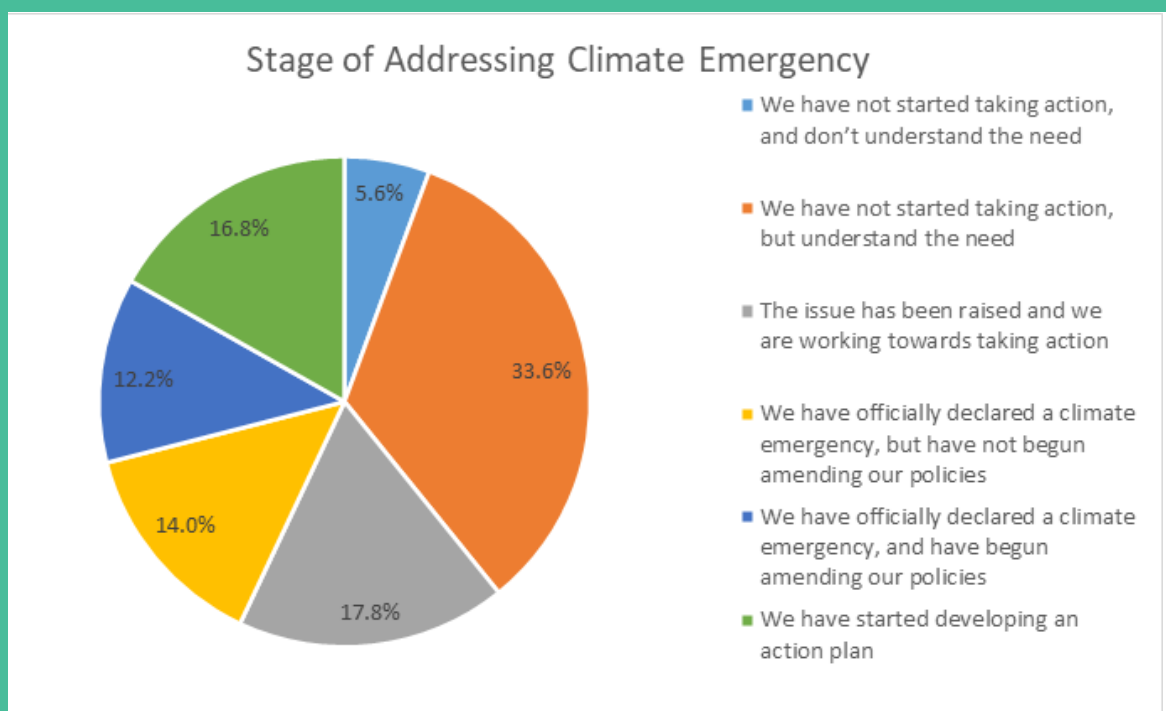

Figure 9: Current stage of action

4.3.2 73 participants (**68.2%** of total respondents) indicating their council is already taking some action, by responding to the question "If your parish council has started taking action, which of the below areas are applicable?", choosing from 15 potential types of action. Results of this question are shown below (Fig. 10).

The most common actions named by those were:

- » **considering topics relating to sustainability in a parish, town or neighbourhood plan (63%; 46 participants)**
- » **started awareness raising communications amongst our community (50.7%; 37 participants)**
- » **formed focused working groups to address topics/actions (37%; 27 participants)**
- » **developed a 'Resilience plan' for emergency events e.g. flooding; storms (35.6%; 26 participants)**
- » **begun development of a specific climate emergency action plan and carried out community consultation/engagement to gain input for developing an action plan (30.1%;22 participants)**
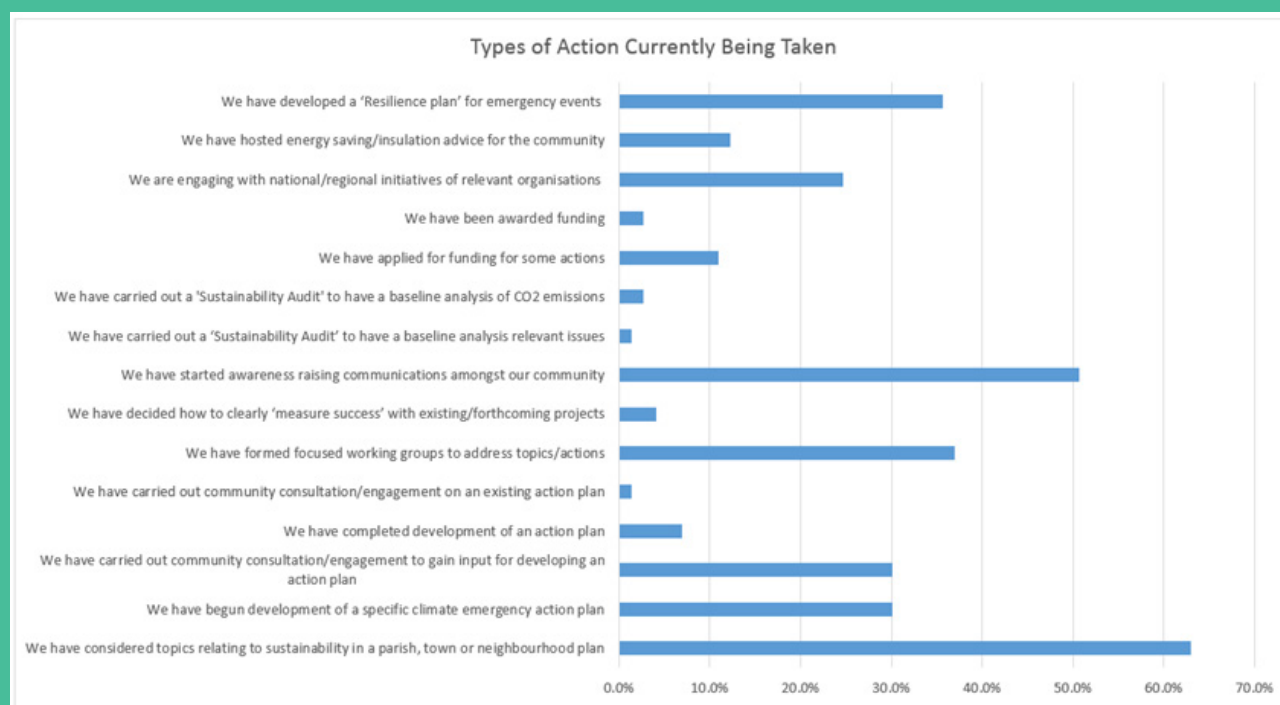

Figure 10: Actions currently being taken. NB. Full label options included examples for several options and can be seen in appendix.

37 comments received regarding actions already being taken, with 6 stating they had formed a dedicated group or internal working groups and 6 stating that they were actively working with other groups in their area. 8 comments indicated that they had started, or planned to start a project or engagement activity, but the Covid Pandemic had interrupted this.

Several comments repeated similar concerns as raised in answer to other questions, and which are explored further in Section 4. Other comments went into detail on action areas, such as

"**We have started by facilitating the upgrade of the heating and insulation in our Parish Hall".**

"**Measuring the parishes carbon footprint to enable us to commit to a net zero plan"**

"**We had a Climate Fair planned for April last year, and an Energy Saving Advice event, both of which have had to be postponed due to the pandemic. In 2019, we gave a free tree to every household in the Parish. Our Parish Plan has been updated in response to our Declaration of a Climate and Environment Emergency"**

"**Our Parish is small with little/no assets, so our focus is to help our residents reduce their carbon footprint**"

"**Targeting public availability of plug-in ev rapid charging points in our rural/tourist area**"

4.3.3 We asked respondents to **"Help us map existing initiatives. Please name any initiatives/ groups you know of in your local area which are already working to address the issues raised above. This can be those you are directly working with or not"**.

81 respondents answered this question, providing a mixture of responses which named specific organised groups, as well as less formal initiatives and also mentions of groups/initiatives which were still in the planning or discussion phase. These answers were coded into the below corresponding categories, and tallied to give show the total number of mentions (Fig. 11). *It should be noted that this tally chart shows number of mentions, not number of unique projects/organisations, for example two parishes in Teignbridge could have named 'Action on Climate Teignbridge', and this would have been counted twice in the tally of 'non-specialised climate groups'.*

As the chart below shows both number of mentions (not unique projects), and includes projects still in development phase, it's value is not in quantifying projects in Devon. Rather it is indicating what areas of the climate emergency communities are thinking about and (starting to) act around, and what there is awareness around. The chart shows there is a large diversity of initiatives covering many different parts of the system, and responses indicate the different scales of delivery ranging from hydro-electric schemes to community litter picks. Initiatives coded under the headings of 'Clean ups' (25); 'Gardening/biodiversity' (24); and 'Tree Planting/Woodlands' (19) were mentioned the most frequently, potentially due to these being accessible and direct areas of action on a local community scale.
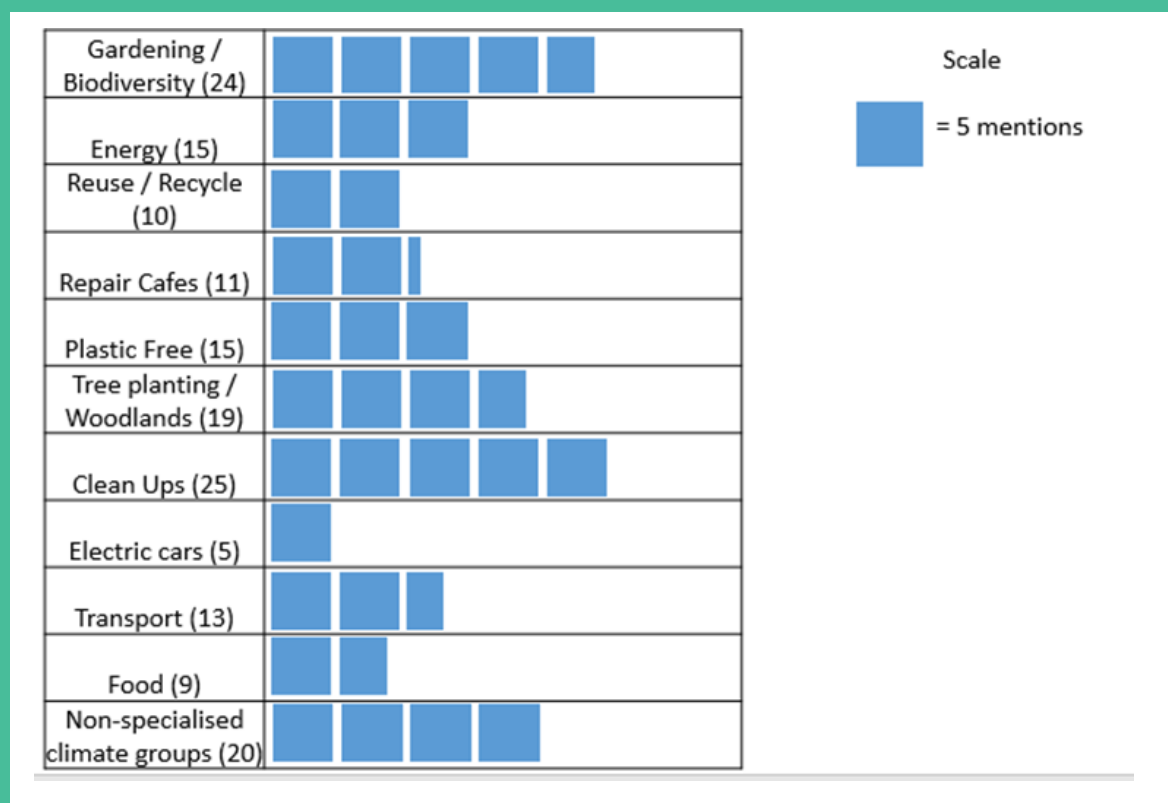

Figure 11 Projects known in local area

Gardening/Biodiversity e.g. Community gardens; Commons management	Energy e.g. Hydro-electricity feasibility study; Community energy company
Reuse/recycle e.g. scrapstores; share shed; recycling schemes	Repair cafes - 'repair café' directly named in group title
Plastic free - 'plastic free' directly named in group title	Tree planting/woodlands e.g. tree wardens; tree planting initiatives; forest
Clean ups e.g. organised/sponsored litter picks; beach cleans	Electric cars e.g. charging infrastructure; fleet conversion
Transport e.g. bike racks/storage; mapping/maintaining footpath walks; train station	Food e.g. community fridges; organic delivery schemes; local food production

Non-specialised groups e.g. coordinating bodies; climate emergency groups.

4.3.4 Respondents were asked: **"Please name any existing expertise you feel you may be able to draw upon within your council/community (e.g. spatial planners, electricians, gardeners)."** 66 responses were received to this question. Responses were analysed to only include words which related to a skill or set of expertise, these were then entered into wordcloud software, with the results shown in (Fig. 12).

A broad range of local expertise was identified by communities, related to:

» **Biodiversity and land use (e.g. Gardener; Farmer; Conservation; Horticulturalist; Hedge layer; Tree warden; Composting; Drainage Expert);**
» **Construction and spatial planning (e.g. Builder; Electrician; planning officer)**
» **Skills related to process (e.g. financial secretary; event planner; parish clerk; community engagement)**
» **Scientific (e.g. Climate scientist; Environmental scientist)**
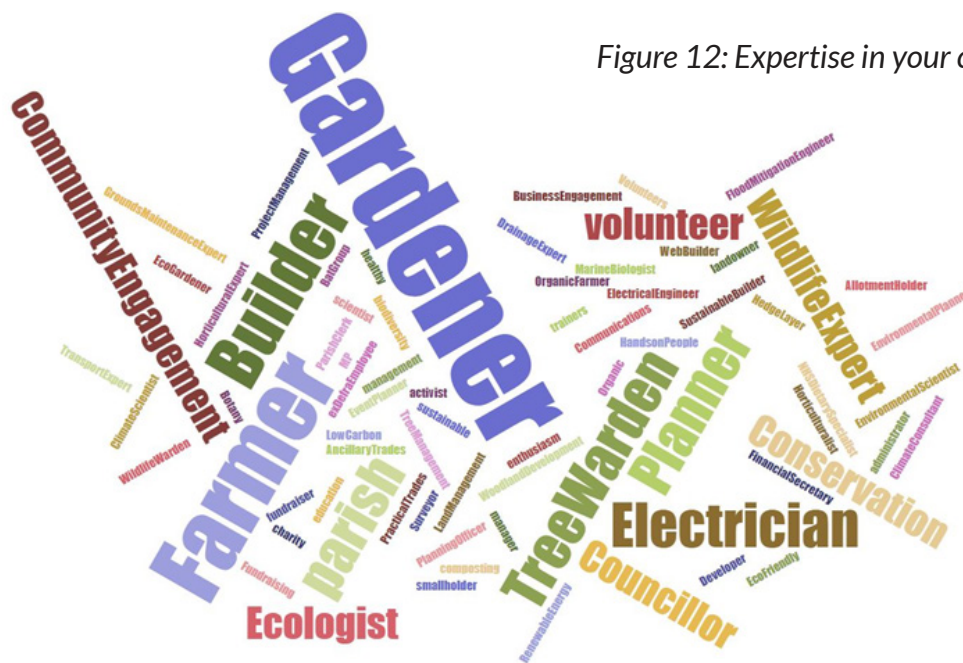» **As well as roles covering other parts of the system (e.g. Transport expert; NHS Dietary specialist)**

Figure 12: Expertise in your community

4.4 Further Comments

26 respondents answered a question seeking **'Any other comments'.** These comments, as well as comments on other questions were looked at together and the below themes emerged.

7 comments described how there was a concern on the resources/time requirements of volunteer councillors to be able to take action (especially with Covid):

> **The issue for most of us is that we are almost fully committed "just" being parish councillors & we aren't clear how easy it is going to be getting the projects from where they are at the moment "between our ears" to viable concerns."**

> **a small village has limited resources and needs to focus on a few key issues"**

9 comments described how there were concerns relating to the whole-system nature of the challenge and doubts about a how to work best with different levels of government and/or other stakeholders, with a fear around the continuation of 'business as usual'.

> **Climate change and environment protection is unlikely to be successfully addressed by forcing change. People will need to want the change. We are still seeing extensive housing and industrial development in this area, and it is very hard to convince residents and parishioners to address their habits when clearly developer profit is so highly promoted and encouraged by higher tiers of local government."**

> **The area is essentially dominated by agriculture and tourism, but so far there seem to be few strands of emerging Climate Emergency plans which are directly relevant to these industries."**

> **Community engagement - find its preaching to the converted whilst mass of population carry on regardless."**

8 comments specifically related their concerns to the small size and rural location of their parish:

> **I'm unaware of where to start with this topic / if it relevant to our parish. I understand it is relevant however we are only a community of less than 200 - would it be possible to link in with another parish?"**

> **We are a small moorland community and some of these issues do not affect us directly. However, many parishioners are concerned about the impacts of these topics on the the wider (and global) community."**

4 comments expressed concern regarding the format of the survey or proposed network:

> **whilst the environment is very important to us all I cannot speak for everyone.   I feel perhaps this survey should be directed to individuals within a community."**

> **This should be a properly funded national initiative, with clear guidance, not something which develops in an ad hoc way, which I fear this all is"**

> **Worried about a talking shop and not practical action"**

Further to comments relating to areas of training (as discussed in section 2), 6 comments mentioned

specific desires for a network:

> "Our key objective is to share with other local parish councils which may not have access to the resources required and to avoid them having to do all the preparatory work."

> "We need to avoid reinventing the wheel in every parish so Devon wide sharing of expertise essential. Also need to integrate County, District, and Parish level actions with clear responsibilities at each level and understanding of how top down and bottom up initiatives work together."

> "Surely there could be a resource 'how we did this in our Parish', or link together Parishes with similar demographics for shared learning. A co-ordinator who held a data base to sign-post would be really useful"

5. Conclusions and Discussion

5.1 With **78.5%** of respondents seeking support, and **43%** actively wishing to send a representative to a network, and a further **50.5%** interested, the mandate for delivering an initial networking event for parish councils is clear. Respondents are seeking to learn from each other's approaches, hopefully as a means of developing best practice strategies and preventing each parish 'reinventing the wheel', but there is some wariness of a network just being a 'talking shop'.

5.2 As the majority of potential support areas, shown in Fig 9, received a reasonably even spread of votes, (with 5 topics each receiving between **11%** and **16%** of choices, and 8 topics each receiving between **19%** and **31%** of choices) further development of support packages beyond developing a network should be explored.

5.3 Although some parishes are further along in their development and delivery of a climate change action plan, support should also be tailored to especially aiding communities at the start of their journey - around awareness raising and communications, baseline audits and community engagement to help the initial development of action plans.

5.4   Several areas of specialist projects and plans are named by respondents (e.g. community ownership; land use; energy generation), but further exploration is needed to understand the most specific and strategic areas to develop and share expertise to support the delivery of action plans.

5.5   Fig. 4 shows perceived priorities, indicating that waste reduction and loss of biodiversity seem to be of greater concern than Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions. This also chimes with findings shown in Fig 11, that show the majority of projects are around topics of gardening, tree planting and plastic/waste reduction. These findings may indicate that GHG awareness/action is not currently being prioritised sufficiently at a local level. GHG emissions are known to be of primary concern in the climate emergency.

5.6   Some areas that have been prioritised as issues, such as gardening, tree planting, or waste reduction, for example, are 'easier-wins' on a community level, rather than larger challenges requiring spatial-planning and financial resources, such as infrastructure for electric vehicles or energy generation. The action which respondents had most completed (Fig. 10) **"considering topics relating to sustainability in a parish, town or neighbourhood plan"** (**63%**; 46 participants), are a medium for encouraging infrastructure projects, but further exploration on the content of such plans is needed.

5.7   The action which the second highest number of respondents had completed (Fig. 10) "started awareness raising communications amongst our community" (50.7%; 37 participants) similarly needs further exploration into the topics around which awareness raising is taking place, as for example, "insulation/energy saving advice" has only been completed by 12.3% of respondents (Fig. 10).

5.8   There is little evidence in discussion of actions (Fig. 10) and of existing local groups (Fig. 11) of activities such as campaigning or lobbying. This is perhaps due to the wording of questions not explicitly raising this issue. It is likely that some work of this nature is currently carried out by organisations named, especially by 'non-specialised climate groups' (Fig. 11), but the extent of this type of activity at a local level warrants further exploration – especially noting the presence of comments relating to changing 'business as usual' and seeking to understand how to integrate actions/policies from the 'bottom-up' and the 'top-down' (i.e. national, county, district and parish).

5.9   Fig. 11 and Fig. 12 indicate the value of communities adopting an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, as they show that there are rich sources of existing expertise and community groups/projects which can be worked with collaboratively to develop further plans and actions and result in cross community peer learning and sharing of best practice.

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