

Sheffield Building Thriving Communities

Interim Project Evaluation

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Sheffield was allocated government funding of £2,649,000 from the 'Communities and Place' element of the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) in late 2022. This funding was used to develop a 3-year response to the cost-of-living crisis covering 2022-2025.

The *Building Thriving Communities* Project is a collaborative project between the Sheffield City Council, Citizens Advice Sheffield, South Yorkshire Community Foundation and Voluntary Action Sheffield. It commenced in 2022, with the goal of strengthening the fabric of Sheffield by enhancing social ties and improving access to community infrastructure.

This interim evaluation report covers the period of November 2022 – July 2024 and aims to provide an overview of achievements to date, report on the project's progress against agreed outputs and impact, against agreed outputs and impact, and offer recommendations for the final six months of the project.

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The *Building Thriving Communities* project was divided into two phases. In the first year, the focus was on strengthening Voluntary, Community and Faith (VCF) sector organisations to ensure they could continue their impactful work at the local level, providing immediate relief and promoting long-term community empowerment. In years two and three, efforts shifted to expanding the capacity of these organisations, moving beyond emergency financial aid to support activities that enhance sustainability and resilience.

Phase 1 - Immediate response and support delivered between 2022-2023, which successfully delivered the following:

- Expanded the reach of the Sheffield Cost of Living Fund, directing financial support to VCF organisations vital in addressing the crisis.
- Supported operational costs for Welcome Places and community hubs, helping them stay open and increase engagement opportunities for residents.

Phase 2 - As well as continuing to distribute funds, the project laid out several forward-thinking initiatives which are currently still being delivered:

- Invested in volunteer development, creating Citizens Advice Sheffield (CAS) community trainer roles to equip staff and volunteers with cost-of-living guidance skills, reducing demand on specialist advisors.
- Established a centralised strategy and fundraising resource, enabling organisations to develop strategic plans, write funding bids, and build resilience.
- Introduced Cost-of-Living and Community Development Workers to support the Welcome Places network using asset-based community development approaches.

These initiatives have strengthened Sheffield's community infrastructure, enhancing social ties, reducing inequalities, and empowering local residents for a more resilient city.

347 Welcome Places have so far been supported by the project's activities

600 Staff & Volunteers Trained No. of staff & volunteers who attended at least 1 out of 81 training sessions delivered by CAS

125 Grants totalling **£935,000** were awarded to grassroots community organisations and Welcome Places

46 jobs created or safeguarded

164 volunteer roles created

Over 70,000 Sheffield residents benefited from the project's activities

About the project

The *Building Thriving Communities* project built on the lessons learned from Sheffield's collaborative response to the pandemic, which demonstrated the power of partnerships between the local authority and the Voluntary, Community, and Faith (VCF) sector.

Through this collaboration, the project brings together local organisations to create a robust, community-led support system by utilising and further developing a city-wide Welcome Places network – a range of community hubs that play a crucial role in helping citizens navigate the challenges of the cost-of-living crisis.

The project aims to **strengthen the capacity** of both Sheffield City Council and the VCF sector to **address inequalities** exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis. The project focuses on empowering local organisations to engage residents more effectively with their neighbourhoods and support services.

This approach is rooted in collaboration, driven by a consortium that includes:



Welcome Places

WHAT ARE WELCOME PLACES?

Welcome Places are run by the Voluntary, Community and Faith (VCF) organisations, alongside the Council and other statutory services, and play a vital role in supporting people in Sheffield.

For this project, the following definition of a Welcome Place has been adopted:

Any place in the city that is open to all, provides a warm welcome and offers signposting and support on the cost-of-living crisis.

As a result of this project and the work carried out by the Community Development Workers and the Cost-of-Living Link Workers, there are now over 300 recognised Welcome Places in Sheffield.



They are the “front door” to our city’s infrastructure of support and the crucial first step for any individual needing to access support services.

CASE STUDY

Brightholmlee Community Café



Just one example of a Welcome Place assisted by the project is the Brightholmlee Community Café Welcome Place. Wharncliffe Side is a village in a relatively deprived and rural area of North Sheffield, with very few spaces to support social activities and high levels of social isolation amongst some of the resident population.

The team at Brightholmlee Methodist church, one of the few community facilities in the area, had always been keen to establish support to address this need. With help from Laura, one of the Community Development Workers in the North area of Sheffield, the team were able to turn the idea into reality and build a thriving new community café, offering affordable food, a space to socialise and a place where people could access cost-of-living help and support.

Laura worked tirelessly to support the café’s development, setting up the initial meeting to engage residents in the project, helping to source food and equipment, recruit volunteers and access essential training and get the service registered with the Food Standards Agency. Around 80 people attended the café on its first day and the café now regularly sees 40-50 people each week, with people who initially attended the café on their own, now chatting and building friendships with other customers.

“The new café has been transformative, energising people and helping them to realise that they can make a difference in the community. Laura’s help has been invaluable...”

Ian Lucraft, from Brightholmlee Methodist Church



LESSONS LEARNT: THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

Lack of nationally, regionally and locally consistent definition of a ‘Welcome Place’ with which local organisations delivering support can identify with, or strive for, has caused some delays to engagement in the initial stages of the project.

Grant funding which has been ring fenced to support Welcome Places was sometimes not perceived to be relevant by organisations which would have been eligible and other support services were not taken up due to the same misunderstanding. Project partners identified this as an issue and tackled it by setting out and promoting the definition to offer clarity and transparency.

Community Development Workers & Cost of Living Link Workers

WHO ARE THEY?

Community Development and Cost of Living Link Workers play a pivotal role in helping Sheffield communities build resilience to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. These workers are embedded in local areas and bring in-depth knowledge of the communities they serve. They help to connect Welcome Places with essential services and resources for their beneficiaries, using an asset-based approach that focuses on building upon existing strengths within the community.

This team, made up of 21 workers funded through the project, works across Sheffield. They are based both within the public sector (within Sheffield City Council's Local Area Committees teams) and the VCF sector organisations. These collaborative efforts have already supported over 239 local organisations, each of which plays a role in supporting thousands of Sheffield residents weekly.



MEET OUR TEAM



WHAT SUPPORT THEY OFFER?



Strengthening Community Resilience:

These workers help local organisations build the capacity to support residents struggling with the rising cost of living. They use their knowledge of local needs to tailor services that best meet the community's challenges.



Connecting Services and Cascading Information:

By acting as a bridge between Welcome Places and services, Community Development Workers connect people to the help they need, from financial advice to mental health support. They also ensure important information about services and opportunities reaches the right people through trusted relationships in their communities.



Supporting Welcome Places:

Community spaces like community centres, family hubs, and places of worship are central to Sheffield's response to poverty. These workers ensure that Welcome Places remain open and accessible, helping them expand their services and deepen their engagement with the community.



Capacity Building and Development:

The team provides ongoing support to Welcome Places, ensuring that these spaces can continue offering vital services. For example, they might help a community centre extend its opening hours or a local church establish a new food pantry or warm hub.

By serving as a key part of Sheffield's infrastructure, Community Development and Cost of Living Link Workers contribute to a sustainable, locally-based support system that reaches thousands of residents across the city. Their work helps reduce inequalities and ensures that Sheffield's communities have the tools they need to thrive, even in challenging times.




LESSONS LEARNT: EARLY RECRUITMENT & MOBILISATION






The recruitment of a team of 21 workers split across two sectors and based within multiple organisations inevitably posed challenges. It brought to life challenging conversations around each of the partners' strengths and how those could be best utilised to ensure the project can be successfully delivered. Although those conversations brought the sectors closer together (further discussed on page 9), it resulted in delays in the recruitment of workers and the mobilisation of resources out into the community. In turn, this had an impact on funding distribution by SYCF and engagement with training and development work being delivered.

Impact of the project so far

SUPPORT OFFERED

<p>Intervention 1</p> 	<p>Grants to organisations providing cost of living support, such as Welcome Places, which offer accessible spaces for community support.</p>
<p>Outputs:</p>	
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>125 organisations received £935,000 in grants</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Grants created 4 FTE jobs & safeguarded 13</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>99 new volunteers</p> </div> </div>	
<p>Intervention 2</p> 	<p>Supporting Welcome Places volunteers through training and capacity building, enhancing their ability to assist their communities.</p>
<p>Outputs:</p>	
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>600 staff & volunteers trained</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>81 sessions delivered</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>90% of participants increased knowledge and confidence</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>103 organisations benefitting</p> </div> </div>	
<p>Intervention 3</p> 	<p>Building capacity and enabling growth through fundraising support for community and voluntary organisations.</p>
<p>Outputs:</p>	
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>30 Welcome Places received 1:1 support (up to June 2024)</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>2 organisations successfully applied for funding as a result of support</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>46 people attended group training sessions delivered by SYFAB</p> </div> </div>	
<p>Intervention 4</p>  <p>and host organisations within the Voluntary, Community and Faith (VCF) sector</p>	<p>Introducing a city-wide network of Community Development and Cost of Living Link Workers, a partnership between Sheffield City Council and the Voluntary, Community, and Faith Sector (VCF), to support Welcome Places.</p>
<p>Outputs:</p>	
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>21 workers in place across the city</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>829 visits to Welcome Places carried out</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>65 new volunteers recruited with their support</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>A 12.5% improvement in the quality of the services offered by WP</p> </div> </div>	

While the outputs provide a quantitative measure of the project's reach, the impact captures the deeper, lasting changes it has fostered within Sheffield's communities. Below are key areas of impact:

	<p>Strengthening Community Resilience:</p>
<p>Through grants, training, and one-on-one support, local organisations and Welcome Places have been empowered to meet growing demands during the cost-of-living crisis. This has not only safeguarded jobs but also ensured that vital community services continue to operate, providing essential support to residents.</p>	
	<p>Increased capacity and confidence</p>
<p>The training of 600 staff & volunteers and the support provided to 103 organisations have significantly enhanced the capacity of community groups to deliver services. With 90% of participants reporting increased knowledge and confidence, volunteers and staff are better equipped to provide front-line support, easing the pressure on specialist services and creating more resilient local networks.</p>	
	<p>Expanded and sustained local support networks</p>
<p>The creation of new FTE jobs and the recruitment of 164 additional volunteers across the project underscores the project's success in bolstering community infrastructure. These workers and volunteers play a critical role in maintaining Welcome Places and fostering long-term engagement, ensuring that vulnerable residents continue to have access to safe spaces and support.</p>	
	<p>Sustained community engagement</p>
<p>Supporting 300 Welcome Places through the project has deepened engagement with local communities, helping them respond to specific needs. This ongoing presence has strengthened trust between community members and support services, fostering a more connected and resilient city-wide network.</p>	
	<p>Positive long-term outcomes for residents</p>
<p>By enhancing access to services and improving the knowledge of volunteers, the project has contributed to the overall well-being of residents. From offering financial guidance to supporting mental health needs, the impact extends beyond immediate relief and is helping to reduce long-term inequalities exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis.</p>	

The project's holistic approach addresses both immediate and long-term community needs, promoting sustainability, empowerment, and local engagement.

Strengthening partnerships

One of the key goals of the project is to create a more coordinated approach to supporting disadvantaged communities, who have been hit hardest by the rising cost of living. Building cross-sectoral relationships however is a complex and challenging process. Studies show that fostering partnerships between public services and the Voluntary, Community, and Faith (VCF) sectors requires more than just collaboration on paper; it demands a sustained effort built on mutual trust, respect, and a shared commitment to common goals. Achieving this level of partnership often involves overcoming significant barriers, such as differing organisational cultures, priorities, and resources¹.

To develop strong, lasting relationships, partners must engage in open communication, honesty, and transparency, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued². Full commitment from all parties is crucial for building the level of trust and understanding needed to make such partnerships effective and impactful, particularly when addressing complex issues like the cost-of-living crisis and community disadvantage.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

As part of the interim evaluation process, we conducted semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders to assess the project's progress in strengthening cross-sectoral partnerships. These conversations included project partners, community leaders, and staff members, providing valuable insights into how the collaboration between the public and VCF sectors has evolved.

FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS:

The interviews revealed several common themes that align with national research on cross-sectoral collaboration. Overall, participants agreed that the project has significantly strengthened relationships between the public and the VCF sector. However, challenges were also identified, particularly in the early stages of the project, which reflect the complexities of building such partnerships.

KEY CHALLENGES INCLUDED

Challenges in coordination:

Stakeholders felt that the project's initial phases were not as well-coordinated as they could have been. Differences in the activities and agendas of project partners, introduction of a hybrid management approach for the Community Development and Link Workers (between SCC and the VCF) and challenges in communicating with the number of partners involved, meant that some stakeholders felt unclear about how all elements of the project would work together. However, once bedded in, it presented an opportunity for people to work together and share information and learning and develop a citywide approach to the work being carried out.

Local vs. city-wide focus:

While the cross-sectoral nature of the project was praised as one of its core strengths, some participants felt that the focus on "hyper locality"—where specific areas were supported by individual development workers - detracted from the city-wide impact. This division between VCF and statutory Welcome Places left some stakeholders unsure of how their efforts contributed to the broader city-wide vision.

Delayed project alignment:

The staggered start dates of activities and recruitment of Community Development Workers (CDWs) further complicated efforts to establish a unified sense of purpose early on. This delay in synchronising efforts hindered the project from achieving its full potential as quickly as anticipated.

ADAPTED INTERVENTION

Despite these challenges, many of the initial obstacles have been addressed as the project gained momentum and began to operate more cohesively.

Recognising the need for increased capacity to better manage and coordinate the diverse activities, the project introduced several key changes:

- **Expanded project management:** To address the lack of coordination in the early phases, additional project management resources were allocated. This strategic decision helped to improve overall communication, reduce confusion, and establish clearer roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders involved.
- **Programme of regular meetings:** To facilitate more effective communication and collaboration, the project introduced a structured programme of regular meetings. These meetings, involving all key partners, provided a platform for open dialogue, enabling better coordination of activities and addressing issues as they arose.
- **Steering group expansion:** Initially, the steering group consisted of a limited number of partners, which some participants felt did not fully reflect the diversity of the VCF sector in Sheffield. In response, the steering group was expanded to include a wider range of VCF organisations. This expansion has allowed for greater inclusion of VCF hosts ensuring that different voices from across the sector are heard and valued.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Having navigated these early hurdles, the project is now much better positioned for future success. If additional funding were secured, the project would build on its stronger foundations and more deeply embedded activities across the network. The lessons learned through this phase of the project have laid the groundwork for more effective cross-sectoral collaboration in the future. With clearer structures, more aligned goals, and strengthened trust between partners, a continuation of the project could have an even greater impact on Sheffield's communities.



LESSONS LEARNT: THE ROLE OF TRUST

Throughout the evaluation process, trust emerged as a central theme. Stakeholders consistently highlighted that building trust in a cross-sectoral project requires open communication, mutual respect, shared goals, and long-term commitment. The quick turnaround time required for the project's funding application limited the ability to establish clear expectations and structures before the project began. However, as the project progressed, these relationships developed, and stakeholders recognised that the partnership had evolved into a more cohesive structure as a result of trust gained between partners.

Mitigating the effects of the cost-of-living crisis

The two "golden threads" of the project—tackling inequality and mitigating the negative effects of the cost-of-living crisis—were seen by stakeholders as enormous challenges that cannot be fully addressed by a single project, no matter how ambitious. These issues are deeply rooted and require a coordinated, systematic approach that accounts for the cumulative impacts of 15 years of austerity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. While the project made significant strides, participants emphasised that meaningful, long-term progress demands sustained collaboration across sectors, as well as policies that directly address the structural inequalities affecting communities.

Nevertheless, the project made positive contributions towards tackling some of the inequalities and disadvantages experienced by the Sheffield communities which have been outlined below.

Recent reports and studies in the UK highlight several negative effects of the cost-of-living crisis on communities, particularly in low-income and vulnerable groups. Below we've highlighted some of the key impacts and how the *Building Thriving Communities* project has helped to address them.

Increased poverty and financial hardship:

Rising costs for essentials like energy, food, and housing have pushed more households into poverty. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023), millions of people, especially those in low-income jobs or dependent on benefits, are facing severe financial hardship, with many unable to afford basic necessities.

Food insecurity:

The cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated food insecurity across the UK. Food banks have seen a significant increase in demand, with organizations like the Trussell Trust (2022) reporting record numbers of emergency food parcels being distributed. More families are relying on food banks to survive as grocery prices continue to rise.

Housing instability:

Rising energy bills, rent, and mortgage rates have made housing unaffordable for many. A growing number of people are facing eviction or homelessness, as they are unable to keep up with rent or mortgage payments. Shelter (2023) has reported an increase in the number of households at risk of losing their homes.

Mental health struggles:

Financial stress and insecurity have had a profound effect on mental health. The constant worry about meeting basic living costs has led to rising levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, with many people unable to access adequate support (Mind, 2023).

Strain on community resources:

Local charities, community organisations, and public services are struggling to cope with increased demand as more people turn to them for help. Many of these organizations are themselves facing funding challenges and higher operating costs, which limits their ability to provide adequate support (NCVO, 2023).



Addressing disadvantage through capacity building & training

To further increase the sustainability of the Welcome Places, the project works to increase the skills, confidence, and resilience of both volunteers and community groups, enabling them to provide more effective support to those affected by the cost-of-living crisis. By offering training and development opportunities, the project empowers staff and volunteers to deliver frontline assistance, reduce pressure on specialist services, and create stronger community networks.



By training staff and volunteers to effectively deliver support to their beneficiaries and be confident in their own ability to offer sound and accurate information, the project aims to reduce the strain on specialist services delivered by Citizens Advice Sheffield (CAS).

Unintended Outcome

The combined effects of an increase in knowledge and understanding of the services provided by CAS, and a significant rise in residents seeking support, meant that the project did not achieve its aim of improving CAS' capacity. Since project commencement, Citizens Advice Sheffield reported an increase in both: the number of clients, and the number of issues requiring full casework rather than advice and guidance.

The number of clients needing in-depth 'casework' support has increased by 75% from 297 in March 2022 to 521 in June 2024.

While these figures suggest the project did not alleviate CAS's capacity pressures as intended, it would be unfair to view this as a failure. The rise in demand highlights the critical role CAS plays and the necessity for ongoing support. Rather than a shortcoming, this reflects the broader context of deepening need in Sheffield's communities, exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis. It also presents a strong argument for continuing to upskill Welcome Places' volunteers and staff so that they can contribute to helping to offset some of this increase in demand.



Addressing disadvantage through capacity building & financial resilience support

To build capacity, improve skills, sustainability and financial resilience, Voluntary Action Sheffield (VAS) and the South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau (SYFAB) are delivering funding surgeries and targeted 1:1 support to organisations. Much of the delivery to date focussed specifically on organisations working within the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities, and particularly those who haven't traditionally engaged with infrastructure organisations in the city.



Tackling inequality



Addressing disadvantage by creating more sustainable Welcome Places

Creating more sustainable Welcome Places, which can withstand their own challenges (such as rising costs of utilities, rent and volunteer costs) and therefore better support their beneficiaries in the long term, continues to be a priority.

In 2023, on average **7,900** benefited from Welcome Places cost-of-living support every week

Perception of the quality of the support offered has increased from 7.2 to **8.1** (out of 10)

In the 12 months prior to September 2024 **50%** of Welcome Places have reported an increase in engagement with their cost-of-living services

Over **50%** of Welcome Places have expanded the support they offer to those in need

59% of Welcome Places were able to secure further funding outside of the project for their cost-of-living support projects

35% of which has been thanks to their Community Development Worker

“Through network building and information sharing many smaller Welcome Places have been able to access resources and experience from the wider network.”

Line Manager of a Community Development Worker (VCF based)



Addressing disadvantage through community grants

To help mitigate the strain on local organisations during the cost-of-living crisis, the project provided targeted grants to offset rising operational costs and increased demand. By offering financial support, the project enabled these groups to keep their doors open, extend their services, and reach more people in need.

125 groups received a total of £935,000 in grants

40% of the projects wouldn't have happened without this funding

Approx. **51,000** beneficiaries supported by grants to date

How did grantees ensure that the funding reached the groups most affected by the cost-of-living crisis?

“Our support is provided only to people who are destitute; that is without accommodation, money or social support, ineligible for any other form of support elsewhere with no right to work.”

Grant Recipient

“We are based in the heart of one of the most deprived areas in the city and work with many newly-arrived migrant families who benefit hugely from all that we offer. Our location and the services we offer are sufficient to draw in those with the greatest need.”

Grant Recipient

Research shows that the cost-of-living crisis is deepening existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting marginalised groups such as single-parent families, disabled people, and ethnic minorities. These communities, already facing systemic disadvantages, are bearing the brunt of rising living costs (Resolution Foundation, 2023).

One of the project's key mechanisms to address inequality is through the work of Community Development Workers (CDWs) and their targeted focus on areas of high deprivation. The CDW team works within 'patches' to identify and respond to gaps in service provision, particularly in marginalised communities. This approach ensures that Welcome Places are developed in areas with the greatest need. CDWs play a crucial role in connecting hard-to-reach individuals, including those who are digitally excluded, to essential services and information that they may not otherwise be able to access. This aligns with several of 'Sheffield's City Goals' which focus on reducing poverty and increasing access to resources for all residents.

The project also proactively targets organisations working with Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities through the activities delivered by Voluntary Action Sheffield, helping them to build capacity and deliver critical services. By providing targeted support, the project strengthens the ability of these organisations to meet the unique needs of their communities.

THE NEED FOR A CITY WIDE APPROACH

Despite these positive steps, it is important to recognise that tackling inequality is a systemic and structural issue far larger than what any single project can address. Participants in our interviews repeatedly highlighted this point, noting that while the project has made significant strides in addressing inequalities within local communities, it will take sustained, coordinated action across all sectors to bring about long-term change. The project's achievements represent essential progress, but only a comprehensive, city-wide effort involving government, the voluntary sector, businesses, and communities can fully resolve the deeply entrenched disparities facing Sheffield.



Further need

What has been initially labelled as the cost-of-living crisis has now become a longer term issue further exacerbated by pre-existing levels of deprivations and the cumulative effects of austerity.

Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023) indicates that, in comparison to other UK core cities such as Manchester, Liverpool, and Birmingham, Sheffield has a relatively high proportion of residents facing income poverty, fuel poverty, and food insecurity. These pre-existing issues have intensified in the wake of rising energy costs, increased food prices, and stagnant wages. This context means that what was once viewed as a temporary crisis now requires a long-term, systematic response.

Although substantial progress has been made, the future sustainability of these efforts depends on continued investment. The next phase of the project must focus on securing additional funding to ensure that these vital community services can continue to grow, adapt, and meet the evolving needs of Sheffield's residents.

WHAT DO WELCOME PLACES NEED?

1. Funding

A significant proportion of Welcome Places (around 35%) emphasised the need for additional funding. This included requests to:

Extend operating hours

Cover wages for staff during training, with some organisations noting they can only afford volunteer involvement

Support building refurbishments and infrastructure improvements

Provide essential provisions like food

2. Training and capacity building

Approximately 25% of Welcome Places expressed a strong demand for more training opportunities. The areas they highlighted included:

Scam awareness

Dementia-friendly practices

Equality and diversity

Volunteer management

Fundraising and governance skills

3. Volunteer recruitment and outreach

About 20% of respondents requested help with recruiting and retaining volunteers. They also called for support in organising outreach events to boost community engagement and attract more users to the Welcome Places.

4. Communication and networking

Nearly 15% of Welcome Places highlighted the need for improved communication and networking between themselves and local authorities, as well as with other organisations.

Key areas included:

More frequent updates on funding and support services

Clearer communication from local councils

Opportunities to connect with other Welcome Places to avoid working in silos

5. Sustainability and partnership development

Roughly 10% Welcome Places mentioned needing support with sustainability efforts, such as:

Securing food donations from local businesses

Developing new models of service delivery, like relaxing means testing

Building partnerships with other agencies to enhance service offerings

6. Practical support for service delivery

Another 15% Welcome Places mentioned specific practical support needs, such as:

Assistance with venue constraints

Welcome Place signage

Help with moving or redeveloping buildings

SYSTEMATIC AND POLICY CHANGES: BEYOND PRACTICAL SUPPORT

While the practical support provided through the *Building Thriving Communities* project has been crucial in addressing short and medium term community needs, it is clear that deeper, long-term challenges remain. As highlighted in the “golden threads” section of this report (on page 11-14), tackling inequality and mitigating the effects of the cost-of-living crisis requires more than localised interventions—there is a pressing need for coordinated, systematic change at both regional and national levels.

The cumulative effects of 15 years of austerity, compounded by the pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, have left many communities in Sheffield and beyond grappling with entrenched inequalities. Without structural reforms, the current support infrastructure will only be able to provide temporary relief. Systematic change, including policy reforms that address income inequality, fair access to essential services, and investing in long-term community development is critical to creating sustainable improvements.

Local charities and community organisations can only do so much when the larger systems governing economic policy, welfare support, and social services are strained. Advocacy for policy changes must go hand-in-hand with grassroots action. This project has revealed the resilience and potential within communities, but unlocking this potential fully will require tackling the root causes of poverty and inequality.

Recommendations & next steps

Based on the project's progress to date, the following recommendations and next steps are proposed to ensure its continued impact and sustainability:

1. Strengthen two-way communication

The early challenges in aligning activities across multiple partners highlight the need to continue to develop two-way (and in many ways 'multi-way' due to the size of the partnership) communication. A more structured approach to exchanging information between all partners will ensure that everyone understands their role, project activities are better coordinated, and efforts aren't duplicated. Strengthening open, ongoing communication will streamline project delivery and keep all stakeholders aligned with the wider project goals.

2. Increase focus on capacity building for sustainable support

While the project successfully supported many Welcome Places and organisations, continued investment in capacity building is essential. More tailored training and development opportunities for volunteers and staff should be provided, alongside a focus on long-term sustainability to ensure that Welcome Places can thrive independently once the project concludes.

3. Expand volunteer and organisational networks

Volunteers are the backbone of many community initiatives. Expanding and deepening the volunteer network through ongoing recruitment, training, and support will help spread the workload and ensure services can meet growing demand. Building partnerships between the organisations and facilitating connections will also extend the project's reach and foster stronger local support networks.

4. Secure additional funding and resources

As demand for services continues to grow, securing additional funding from regional and national sources is crucial. The project has not only addressed key community needs but has also become an integral part of the city's support infrastructure. Communities have come to know, understand, and trust the support provided. However, without continued funding, there is a real risk that all the trust and confidence built through the project could be undone. Sudden withdrawal of support would leave vulnerable communities without the help they rely on, eroding the strong foundations this project has established. Sustaining this funding will be critical to maintaining the progress made and ensuring long-term resilience.

5. Celebrate success and foster collaboration

Bringing all project partners and stakeholders together regularly for training, sharing success stories, and celebrating achievements will create a more connected ecosystem of support. This will help partners better understand their role within the wider project and foster a sense of shared ownership and collective purpose.



NEXT STEPS:

The *Building Thriving Communities* project will continue its vital work over the next six months, concluding at the end of March 2025. This interim evaluation provides a snapshot overview of the project's progress, offering an opportunity to assess its trajectory and make any necessary adjustments to ensure it remains on track. It also serves as an important tool in seeking further funding to sustain the support provided, preventing any disruption in services as the project approaches its scheduled end.

The final evaluation report, to be released in March 2025, will be a more comprehensive review, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data. It will not only reflect on the measurable outcomes but also share the human stories behind the numbers, illustrating the profound impact this project has had on communities across Sheffield.

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To find out more about the project, read through the case studies of the project, and to get support please visit <https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/thriving-communities>



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For any questions relating to this report contact hello@socialresearchbuilders.com