

Community Development programme

End of year one report

Executive summary

August 2024 - August 2025

Aim

To build a strong, vibrant, and connected VCSE sector, using community development as the primary tool. Communities are strong, resilient, inclusive and connected, where people support one another in an environment that promotes health and wellbeing.

Approach

Supported by two Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) Community Developers and Connectors (CD/C) will facilitate listening, engagement, collaboration, connected learning, community action and systems change. Listening to and supporting communities, learning and understanding, especially the gaps and hidden voices, influencing statutory organisations and institutions, and strengthening the VCSE sector are all core to this approach.

Narrative is key to illuminating the personal stories behind statistics. Case studies and reflections from Community Developers and Connectors are essential to capturing the lived experiences, challenges, and solutions emerging from the ground – and ensuring these are shared with relevant strategic partners and stakeholders.

The work is interested in what we are learning from the people and communities we work with, how this learning has informed our practice, and what changes we may make to our delivery plans as a result.

Objectives

Listening to & supporting communities

ENGAGING people in communities of place or shared need to identify priorities, assets, strengths, and gaps – and to support them in taking collective relevant action

Improving Practice

Embedding LEARNING from community engagement to inform and adapt delivery, with a focus on the lived experiences, challenges, and solutions identified by Community Developers and Connectors.

Strengthening the VCSE sector

STRENGTHENING the VCSE sector (including both CVS') through supporting third-sector organisations, staff, and volunteers; sharing best practice; supporting new networks, activities and organisations.

Influencing statutory organisations, institutions and wider strategic partnerships

Using community intelligence to INFLUENCE system change and decision-making, whilst promoting the impact (including prevention) the sector makes.

Developers and Connectors

£7,901 funding
46 projects
11 Events
9 Insight and engagement activities
9 Forums
(New youth and One Lynton & Lynmouth forums)
10 additional support activities
351 partners were involved
reaching 1048 participants.

Community Engagement, Insight & Participation
Communication & Access
Social Support, Inclusion & safety
Health & Wellbeing
Education, Learning & Employment
Culture & Creativity
Environment & Sustainability
Community Spirit & Identity

8 themes of work

8 output categories

1. Communication & Marketing
2. Information & Signposting
3. Organisational Development & Capacity Building
4. Volunteering Management
5. Event & Activity Coordination
6. Community Engagement & Involvement
7. Partnership & Networking
8. Advocacy & Representation

Age groups
Community workers / leaders and Volunteers
Clinical populations
Social
Family, Parent/carer and child
Inclusion groups (Plus populations)
Ethnicities
General public
Workers
Sex (Men / Women)
Deprivation / Socio-economic
Cross-sector organisations/ groups /staff

33 targeted populations

7 outcome areas

1. Organisational Development & Capacity Building

- VCSE organisation connected with organisational development resources and support
- Improved capability of local volunteers, particularly those working with vulnerable populations
- Empowered small businesses – to set up websites/booking systems
- Boost confidence, improve communication skills
- Increased corporate interest in volunteering and CSR initiatives
- Strengthening partnerships/relationships between corporate sponsors, public sector, and VCSE voluntary sector

2. Communication, Awareness & Information Sharing

- Increased awareness and communication (VCSE, volunteers, partners) – local groups, activities, volunteer roles, training, funding, local needs/assets
- Community insight (generate and share) – corporates interested in speaking directly to VCSE organisations
- Community voice is heard

3. Volunteering & Community Participation

- Volunteering
- Increased volunteering
- Secure volunteer placements
- Increased engagement – registration/sign-ups and participation/attendance
- Increased corporate interest in volunteering and CSR initiatives (also fits here)
- Empowering community members to take ownership/responsibility

4. Community Mobilisation & Action

- Mobilising social community action
- Support community to identify and implement solutions which improve people's lives
- Kickstarted project opportunities
- Increased community action via networks and forums that act as a catalyst for local initiatives
- Increase, and support existing, community assets/provision

5. Social Inclusion, Wellbeing & Support

- Reduced stigma (more inclusive)
- Increased inclusion/awareness of minority groups – foster empathy and understanding, build welcoming supportive communities
- Reduced social isolation/loneliness – increased social networks, safe social environments, increased social interactions
- Provide a safe space for sharing experiences and accessing emotional support
- Increased mental health resources (drop-in, peer support, resources)
- Increased support for those with health conditions (cancer, CVD)
- Improved mental wellbeing
- Improved access to support services
- Improves access to services/activities/opportunities
- Increased access to basic need support (food, clothing)
- Provide free support

6. Community Spirit, Pride & Recognition

- Celebrating communities – recognition of individuals and groups for outstanding contributions
- Increased community spirit / civic participation
- Sense of pride and connection (community)
- Increased peer support groups

7. Skill Development & Empowerment

- Attendees gain practical skills to improve their wellbeing and communities
- Increased agency, independence (to access local community)

Objective 1 - Listening to and Supporting Communities

Community Developers (CDs) worked with people in communities of place and shared need to ensure that change is rooted in lived experience and guided by what matters most locally. Through trust-building, inclusive engagement, and collaborative action, communities identified their own priorities, assets, and gaps—leading to solutions that are relevant, sustainable, and community-led.

Approach

Developers and Connectors used a range of methods—surveys, forums, themed networks, asset mapping, co-design, and wellbeing events to create safe spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and shared decision-making. They connected people with tools, networks, and funding, while supporting capacity-building and leadership development.

Impact

Individuals felt more confident, connected, and empowered to contribute, often taking leadership roles for the first time.

Organisations developed stronger partnerships, reduced silo working, and built greater trust with communities.

Communities experienced increased ownership, cohesion, and resilience.

The wider system gained deeper insights into local priorities, enabling more responsive and collective action.

Challenges

Key barriers included questions of representation (whose voices are heard or missing), limited resources for engagement, varying skills in research methods, and the risk of consultation fatigue. Staff also noted the difficulty of reaching ‘quiet voices’ and maintaining momentum without dedicated budgets or time.

Learning

- Trust and relationships are the foundation of meaningful engagement.
- Lived experience must be valued as expertise and embedded in decision-making.
- Small actions can build confidence and catalyse wider change when communities are supported.
- Inclusive methods and better feedback loops are essential to ensure no one is left behind.

Recommendations

- Provide CDs with dedicated training, budgets, and flexible engagement opportunities.
- Strengthen demographic data collection to understand representation gaps.
- Invest in inclusive spaces, facilitation, and accessibility resources.
- Build stronger feedback loops between community insights and strategic decisions.
- Embed co-design and lived experience models, such as the Poverty Truth Commission, across partnerships.

Conclusion

The work demonstrates that when communities are listened to, trusted, and supported, they develop stronger relationships, clearer priorities, and more sustainable solutions. While challenges remain—particularly around inclusion and resourcing—the approach has laid the foundations for long-term, community-led change.

Objective 2 - Improving Practice by Embedding Community Learning

Community Developers (CDs) and Connectors play a vital role in capturing lived experience and community insight. Objective 2 focused on embedding this learning into practice, ensuring that community voices directly shape planning, delivery, and decision-making. By valuing on-the-ground knowledge as strategic intelligence, the project strengthened responsiveness, improved services, and deepened trust across communities and organisations.

Approach

Introduced structured reflective practice, with monthly and quarterly feedback sessions.

Created formal platforms such as the Strategic Steering Group and Inclusive Community Framework to embed community learning within wider partnerships.

Used tools like reflective logs, storytelling, and learning circles to capture insights.

Ensured community feedback informed planning, co-design, and project adjustments.

Impact

More responsive delivery: Real-time insight enabled faster adjustments, such as tailoring service hours, improving accessibility, and redesigning programmes.

Amplified community voice: Stories and lived experience were shared with decision-makers, shifting priorities away from assumptions.

Stronger relationships: Developers and Connectors acted as bridges between residents and organisations, driving collaboration on shared priorities.

Refined practice: Reflective practice fostered peer support, innovation, and improved consistency in learning.

Challenges

- Capturing learning systematically and ensuring it reaches the right decision-makers.
- Time and capacity pressures limiting reflection and follow-up.
- Balancing multiple community priorities with limited resources.
- Skills and confidence gaps in reflective practice, facilitation, and co-production.
- Emotional burden on staff working closely with difficult stories and tensions.

Learning

- Listening is only the first step; insight must be acted upon and evidenced.
- Frontline knowledge is strategic knowledge — timely, relevant, and essential for effective planning.
- Reflection strengthens practice, but must be supported with time, training, and structures.
- Flexibility is key — embedding learning means being prepared to adapt quickly.

Recommendations

- Establish a clear Community Insight to Action model (“You said / We did”) to evidence change.
- Provide staff with training, protected reflection time, and emotional support.
- Build stronger data-sharing relationships with primary care and other partners.
- Systematically record community assets and insights to inform long-term planning.
- Strengthen feedback loops to ensure communities see the impact of their contributions.

Conclusion

Embedding community learning makes services more responsive, inclusive, and effective. By elevating lived experience as a core part of planning and delivery, the project has begun to shift culture and practice across Northern Devon. Sustaining this progress will require investment in staff support, clearer processes, and stronger mechanisms for turning insight into action.

Objective 3 - Strengthening the VCSE sector

Strengthening the sector, including the Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS), aim to support organisations, staff, and volunteers; share best practice; and enable new networks and initiatives. This approach aimed to create a more resilient, connected, and inclusive VCSE environment, better equipped to respond to local challenges and community needs. Developers, Connectors and CVSs worked together to build skills, enhance collaboration, support inclusion, and promote innovation.

Approach

The VCSE sector was strengthened through a programme of support for organisations, staff, volunteers, and community developers/connectors (CD/C), focusing on capacity building, collaboration, innovation, and inclusion. CVSs played a central role by delivering training, volunteer support, leadership development, and recognition events, alongside initiatives such as quiet voice methodology, line management support, and revitalising volunteering campaigns to boost skills and confidence. Collaboration was enhanced through Leadership Hubs, organisational forums, and peer support sessions, with networks like the ND CD network expanding cross-sector connection and wellbeing. Organisational growth and innovation were supported through Devon Connect and targeted development, enabling new and emerging groups to access resources and deliver community-led activities. Inclusive approaches, including quiet voice practices and the North Devon Inclusive Community Framework, ensured underrepresented voices shaped initiatives and groups were better equipped to support people with complex needs.

Impact

The programme increased skills, confidence, and organisational resilience across the sector. It strengthened collaboration, improved inclusion, and fostered a culture of peer learning and innovation. As a result, the VCSE sector is now more connected and better equipped to sustain community action and address complex local challenges.

Challenges

The work highlighted systemic issues such as inequitable access to support, difficulties embedding training, sustainability risks, shifting policy and funding landscapes, and limited recognition of CVS roles.

Learning

Key learning emphasised the need for tailored support for smaller organisations, long-term investment in infrastructure, and stronger systems for monitoring impact. Relationships, trust, and peer support emerged as critical drivers of change.

Recommendations

To sustain and deepen progress, the sector should:

- Secure ongoing investment and recognition for CVS infrastructure roles.
- Embed good practice through accessible resources and shared learning.
- Strengthen leadership and peer networks while amplifying quiet and marginalised voices.
- Monitor outcomes simply and effectively to evidence impact and attract future funding.

Conclusion

Objective 3 has laid the foundations for a stronger, more resilient and inclusive VCSE sector in Northern Devon—one that is better positioned to support communities, influence systems, and respond to emerging challenges.

Objective 4 - Using community intelligence to influence system change and decision-making

Objective 4 focused on harnessing community intelligence to shape statutory decision-making, strengthen strategic partnerships, and highlight the preventative impact of the community sector. By gathering lived experience through inclusive engagement methods and translating these insights into strategic messages, the project positioned community voice at the centre of system change.

Key Achievements

Community Engagement: Improved inclusive methods to capture diverse voices and build robust evidence.

Strategic Influence: Insights informed policies, service design, and funding decisions, shifting institutions towards preventative and person-centred approaches.

Partnerships: Strengthened collaboration with statutory organisations, including alignment of the Community Wellbeing & Inclusion (CW&I) group with OND and NDF strategic partnerships.

Visibility & Recognition: Elevated the role of the community sector in prevention, resilience, and co-production, with growing institutional recognition of lived experience.

Impact

This work has enhanced trust, fostered co-production, and improved outcomes for communities by ensuring services better reflect local priorities. It has also begun to embed prevention and early intervention into system-level thinking, demonstrating the sector's strategic value.

Challenges

Progress has been hindered by institutional resistance to change, difficulties in aligning community insights with statutory language, and inconsistent partner engagement. To address these, the project invested in building trusted relationships, developing tailored communications, and creating inclusive spaces for ongoing collaboration.

Learning

System change requires more than representation—it needs authentic embedding of community voice in governance and planning. Trust, language, and co-production are critical, while persistence and alignment with system priorities unlock longer-term influence and investment.

Next Steps

Moving forward, the project will:

- Strengthen inclusive engagement mechanisms.
- Formalise partnerships with statutory bodies through shared frameworks and co-produced strategies.
- Improve measurement of impact and prevention outcomes.
- Advocate for sustainable investment in community development infrastructure.

Conclusion

Objective 4 has demonstrated that when community intelligence is valued and embedded, it not only influences decision-making but also drives more equitable, preventative, and collaborative systems. Sustained investment and strategic alignment are now essential to secure long-term change.

Priorities for Year 2 (Next steps)

Year one supported community action, learning and showcasing the impact of this work and the role of Community partnerships, Developers, Connectors and CVS.

In year two we want to create:

Strategic Planning Document: A comprehensive strategy is needed to consolidate learning, define outputs/outcomes, and guide future investment and alliance development.

Staffing and budget review; with some organic staffing changes – we can look at the budget for year 2 – and ensure we have corrected staffing (strategically and operationally) in place

Evaluation Review: Internal and external evaluation approaches should be reassessed to ensure they capture impact and inform strategic decisions.

Wellbeing Focus: Staff and volunteer wellbeing must be embedded into organisational culture and planning.

Corporate Engagement Strategy: Develop a targeted approach to engage corporate partners and secure long-term investment.

Feedback and Learning Systems: Strengthen feedback loops across operational, strategic, and community levels to ensure alignment and responsiveness.