

GLOUCESTERSHIRE HOTSPOTS

FINAL REPORT FROM
RESEARCH PARTNERS
2022 - 2024

Photo credit: Fair Shares



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Introduction

Gloucestershire Hotspots Network is a group of community organisations that have come together to catalyse and invest in connections in communities. Their aim was to support local groups to create new activities, understand what works in developing community economic development initiatives and social enterprises, and gather evidence of the collective impact of this to be able to advocate to statutory partners. This, in turn will grow local, economic, social and environmental resilience for their neighbourhoods and to influence the local and regional mainstream system.

The current members are Gloucestershire Gateway Trust (GGT), GL11, The Grace Network, Gloucestershire Community Building Collective (GCBC), Fair Shares and The Venture.

As part of their support, funders Thirty Percy provided additional resources for a research partner to:

- Capture learning, impact and evidence of economic growth and improved community resilience and power resulting from changes brought about by 'Hotspot Communities'
- Capture and surface individual organisational working practices, what works well and what can be universalised and applied elsewhere.

Centre for Thriving Places was founded in 2010. We provide expert guidance, insight, practical tools and support to help measure and grow the things that really matter to everyone's lives. Our multidisciplinary teams help bring local decision makers and communities together to develop shared goals, and co-design policies, strategies and actions to achieve them.

Centre for Thriving Places has been supporting Network members as Research Partner since the start of 2022 to capture insights and learning. This support was initially structured around the following three areas:

1. Understanding impact in ways that demonstrates 'what works', redefines progress and community wealth and demonstrates the value of Horizon 3 ways of working (H3) to the wider 'system'²
2. Understanding process in ways that builds learning into the Hotspot Network and draws out the key ingredients for success for H3 hotspot development
3. Understanding the model in ways that support expanding impact and wider systems change in Gloucestershire and replication or scaling across the UK into the future

¹ The Hotspots Network approach is to 'heat-up' areas with a recognised history and current commitment to community action to help them thrive with the support of appropriate investment of time, skills, trust, and financial support.

² This is a "framework for creating a shared vision of a new system and a plan for moving towards it" (NPC, 2024)

This report sets out what has been delivered and learned in two years through this research partnership, including adaptations to the aims and approach as the work iterated to respond to the changing context and needs of the partnership.

These insights have been informed by case studies gathered by the six partner organisations, reflective learning sessions and interviews with each partner in April 2024 as well as interviews with other strategic stakeholders in June and July 2024. The insights are presented as a narrative synthesis.

Understanding Impact

Part two sets out the ways in which we set out to understand the collective impact of the Network – by developing a Theory of Change and a set of shared measurement resources.

Part three sets out what has been learned from collecting data across the partners' activities about the impact they are having, and what are the ways in which change happens in communities. It also sets out the impact on partners as a result of participating in the Hotspots Network.

Understanding process

Part four sets out learning from the reflection meetings held by partners and from case studies about how local capacity is built, trusting relationships developed and if and when tipping points are created.

Understanding the model

Part five sets out what has been learned in terms of how the model has delivered local impact and wider systems change in Gloucestershire and what should be considered if replicating or scaling into the future.

Reflections

Part six sets out some reflections from the Centre for Thriving Places team on what we have observed from the insights in the previous chapters, and what partners may want to consider in future work.

Appendices

We include full examples and information that has been referred to throughout the report for reference.

Creating a shared process

Stage 1: Developing a collective vision

Hotspots Network partners, in collaboration with other stakeholders*, created a Theory of Change which set out the aspirations and mechanisms by which the Network intends to contribute to long-term change. [**Barnwood Trust, National Lottery Community Fund, Gloucestershire Community Foundation, GCH housing association and White City Community Action Group, Creative Sustainability*]

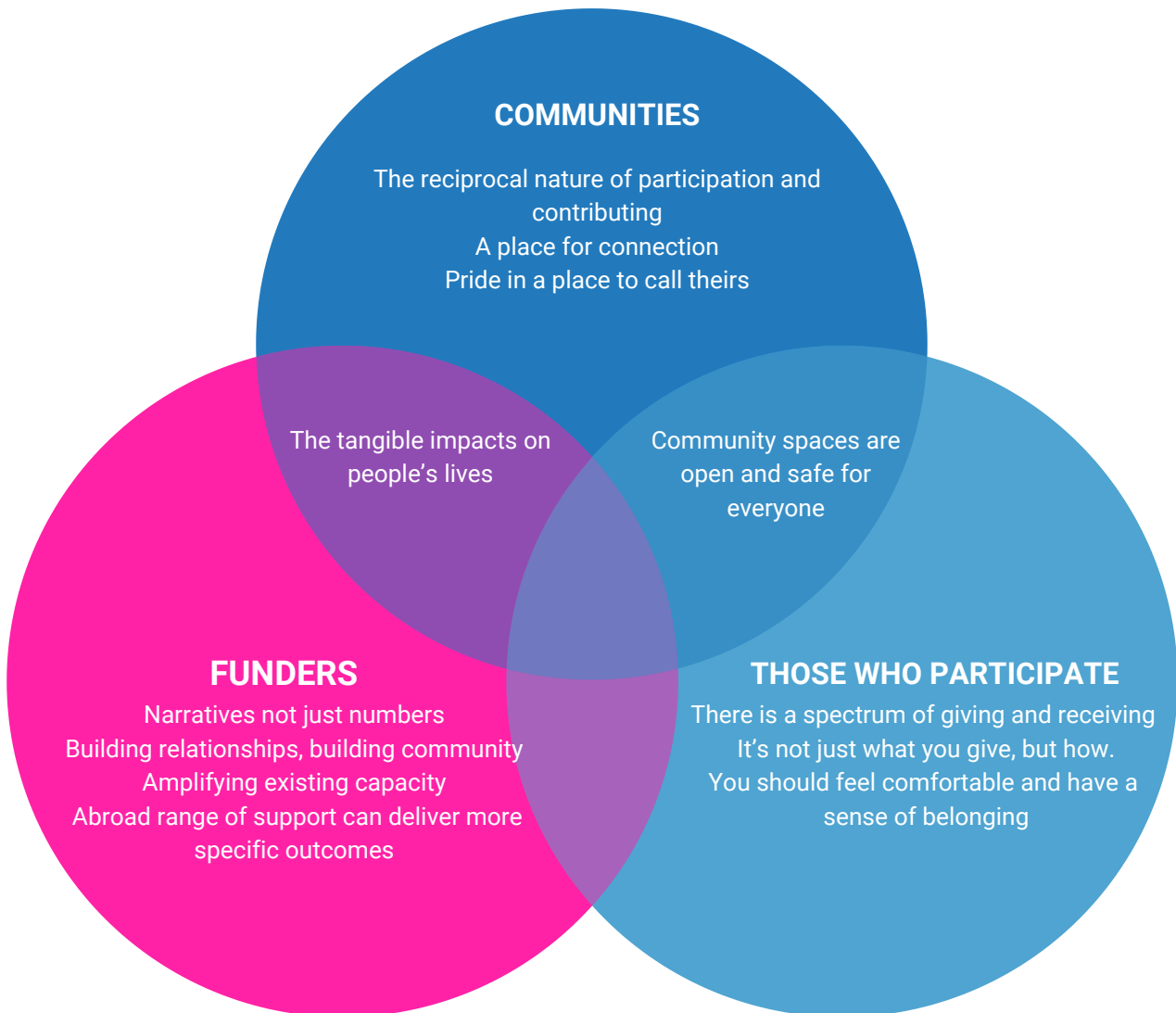
Figure 1: Draft Theory of Change, May 2022

<p>WE WILL harness connections and trust embedded in the hotspots to catalyse and invest in...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection in communities in specific places... • To create for themselves, drive forward and understand what works in developing community economic development plans, new initiatives and social enterprise, in order to..... • Grow local, economic, social and environmental resilience for their neighbourhoods and to influence the local and regional mainstream system 	<p>WE WILL DO THIS BY testing and evidencing our hypotheses about what will make the difference and increase the impact as being....</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging with and creating better research making the case for our model • Using local community economic development plans • Focussing on increasing community wealth as defined by communities • "Irrigating" the VCSE system, through core funding community organisations and activist bodies to build their practice and delivery across the ecosystem • Building a collaborative union of VCSE organisations
<p>WHY? (What are the problems we are tackling?)</p> <p>Lack of strategic recognition for and visibility of the sector from public bodies/funders and commissioners – no consistent place at the shaping/influence/decision making tables</p> <p>The spectrum of the VCSE from community through to social enterprise has the ability to work together to increase impact VCSE and communities do high quality work but it is patchy due to lack of investment</p> <p>Evidence: VCSE outperformed the mainstream during the pandemic; Evidence of the Hotspots Network current delivery; Evidence of the critical importance of "connection" already in place; Evidence that healthy communities are connected communities</p>	
<p>WHO? (Who are we targeting or influencing?)</p> <p>VCSE organisations (initially 5 GHN members) but will grow outwards and invite others Individuals and groups in communities</p> <p>People we want to influence: policy makers, local decision makers, funders, investors and commissioners</p>	
<p>WHAT? (What are the longer-term outcomes we will aim to deliver?)</p> <p>VCSE is recognised as an important part of the mainstream economy, contributing to the health and wellbeing of communities Communities are at the table as equal partners – being understood to be the best people to define and create community wealth in their communities</p> <p>Communities and residents don't believe they need permission to take action Bottom-up initiatives, plans and enterprise are seen as the best way to make neighbourhoods happier and stronger There is realistic and accessible commissioning for the community sector</p>	
<p>HOW? (The actions we will take to meet the outcomes)</p> <p>Core funding to network partners to provide leadership in community action and resilience Provide start up funding and support for social enterprise initiatives from local residents and community organisations Develop 5 Local Community Economic Development plans where there is community energy Capture learning and evidence and apply learning as we go Capture and surface our own working practices to identify what can be used elsewhere</p>	

Stage 2: Identifying the stories Network members wanted to be able to tell

After the development of the Theory of Change, we engaged Network partners to understand the stories they wanted to be able to share. Knowing what matters to partners in terms of storytelling is an important component in prioritising the evidence base of what impact is being created, how and for whom. This is particularly pertinent for small frontline organisations who need to balance the demands of data collection with delivering their work.

Figure 2: Messages for stakeholders (April 2022)



These messages align with the principles underpinning the H3 approach of imagining and developing a new system in that they describe the ways in which the Network members believe a new system can emerge.

The partners wanted to be able to share stories with the **communities** in which they are based about how participating in community activities and action is a reciprocal act – you can give and also receive. They also wanted to be able to show that community spaces are an open and safe place for everyone and – compared to statutory services – that you don't have to tick boxes to participate. These spaces are a place for connection to other people and organisations. The focus is on what the community can develop and deliver for themselves; organisations are there to facilitate action. Through action and ownership, they can have pride in a place to call theirs.

Partners wanted to be able to explain to **individuals** who participate in activities and services how there is a spectrum of giving and receiving, and that giving back to your community can happen in many ways. What is important is not just what you give, but how. They also wanted individuals to be able to see how they can be comfortable and have a sense of belonging from participating in community-led action.

To **funders and other stakeholders**, Network partners wanted to be able to show the tangible impacts on people's lives – relatable human stories – and then be able to describe the impact on the wider community. They wanted to show how building relationships and building community through a range of activities can have an impact on both specific outcomes for statutory agencies as well as the capacity of the community. They particularly wanted to be able to tell the stories about how change happens – and when it doesn't – and what is needed to support those helping their communities thereby amplifying existing capacity.

Stage 3: Building a common measurement framework

The Theory of Change and priorities for stories were used to inform a common measurement framework that was intended to be used by Network partners to gather data about the impact of their interventions on their communities, as well as what would be explored through a process of reflection and learning.

We started with the longer-term outcomes that were identified in the Theory of Change process, and then created a number of interim outcomes. These were:

- Community members can better articulate what their needs are and what community wealth means to them
- There is an increase in individual and community levels of agency to take action to improve local outcomes
- Communities can give examples of where work led by them has resulted in positive outcomes for their community
- Community organisations can demonstrate they deliver outcomes for individuals in their communities, outlined in their funding or evaluation plans
- There is increased trust within the community (and the community level institutions)
- There is evidence of the Hotspots Network organisations being more influential in discussions and strategic conversations with mainstream agencies locally - Gloucestershire County Council/ICS
- Resources made available for VCSE to shape and deliver levelling up activities

What did we want to answer through this process?

A broad approach to gathering insight and learning was developed which aligned with the time and resources available within Network partner organisations, and through the support process provided by CTP.

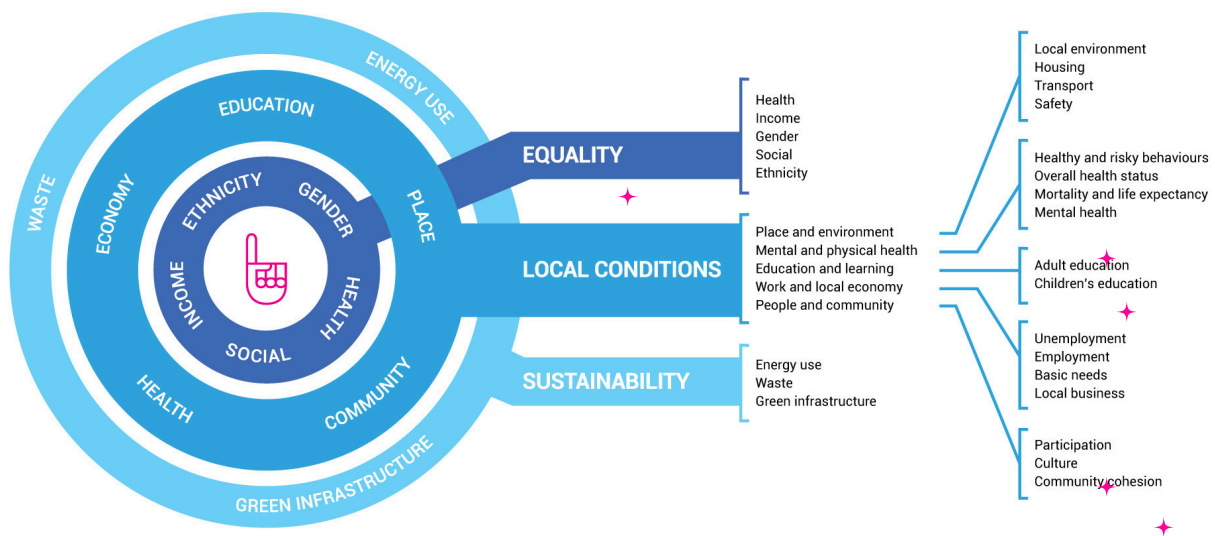
Question	Source of insight	When
<p>What collective interim outcomes does the HN contribute towards in Gloucestershire? <i>(communities articulating needs, increased agency, increased trust, delivering outcomes for individuals and the community)</i></p>	<p>New data collected against the HN Common Framework for individuals, specific project outcomes data, HN reflection sessions, case studies</p>	<p>At least once a year</p>
<p>What outcomes have the following HN specific activities contributed towards (increased resources, HN members being more influential)</p>	<p>Primary data from members; qualitative insight from the community</p>	<p>In the last 6 months of the project.</p>
<p>How does delivering x,y,z activities lead to the outcomes you have identified? What journeys have members of your community gone on, what essential components of support were needed for them to experience change?</p>	<p>Qualitative primary data (e.g. case studies, interviews, staff notes, HN reflective workshops)</p>	<p>Ongoing within projects, at specific reflection points in the HN project, facilitated by CTP.</p>
<p>Why does working together (within HN and with others) increase the impact of the work?</p>	<p>Qualitative data (e.g. case studies, interviews, staff notes, HN reflective workshops)</p>	
<p>Who and what else helps to achieve the change in your communities?</p>	<p>HN reflective workshops, VCS Maps.</p>	

Measuring outcomes for individuals

The Thriving Places Index framework offers a strong fit with the broad outcome areas for individuals discussed with Network partners in interviews and workshops. A few areas didn't resonate (housing, transport, culture, green infrastructure). Areas that were deemed the strongest impact areas across the Hotspots Network are indicated. We used this framework as a starting point for consistent impact measurement across multiple network partners delivery.

We proposed indicators for each subdomain that partners could use to gather insights about the impact they are creating with and for individuals in their communities. These were taken from the Thriving Places Index, or adapted at partner's requests. The initial plan was for partners to gather data on their organisational outcomes and CTP would pull a narrative analysis of all the indicators to support with a common story of what impact is being created around the conditions that people need to thrive in Gloucestershire.

Figure 3: The Thriving Places Index, with priority outcomes identified



The Thriving Places Index helps to answer three important questions. Are we creating the right local conditions for people to thrive? Are we doing that equitably, so everyone can thrive, and sustainably, so current and future generations can thrive? It is designed to give a balanced framework and an easily read 'dashboard' of information on the different elements that support the wellbeing of people, places and the planet.

Measuring outcomes: adapting to the realities of working in communities

In October 2022, Network partners selected priority outcomes from the list to align with their organisations current work, funding and other priorities. Partners were asked to review the suggested indicators with their teams, particularly delivery staff, to understand how they could be applied in practice. One-to-one support was provided by CTP for this process.

At a learning and reflection meeting in March 2023 Network partners discussed their experiences of trying to implement a consistent approach to gathering quantitative data. It was agreed that the process was not going to work in practice: for some organisations the need to collect data at multiple timepoints did not align with their community-led delivery model, for others, they preferred to develop existing approaches to gathering qualitative data.

It was agreed that each partner would therefore focus on gathering insights using the standardised case study template we developed, to align with the priority outcome areas highlighted on the previous page. A copy of this template can be found in Appendix 2.

Understanding impact

What was delivered for individuals and communities?

Outcomes for individuals

This section sets out some of the common themes from the case studies prepared by Network partners in September 2023, using the case study template in Appendix 2. The case studies aimed to understand what impact is being created and the way that change happens.

Two case studies were analysed per partner. We note where there was learning from specific members' work, as well as the role that social networks play in underpinning all organisations' work.

There were six common outcomes noted from the case studies gathered by partners. It is important to note that GGT and the Grace Network support other groups to deliver their work, so some of the outcomes noted for individuals have been enabled through their support of these frontline groups.

Figure 4: Common Outcomes identified through Network partner case studies



Learning new skills (TPI: adult education)

Fair Shares' case studies highlighted the skills people gained from participating in time banking, and that this helped to build their confidence. The Grace Network showed how community businesses provide skills and experience to participants, as well as generating broader positive economic outcomes for the area - both in terms of employment and footfall for local business.

Doing things together (TPI: participation)

Many of the partners support people to achieve their goals, whether they are personal (Fair Shares) or communal (like green space improvements from GCBC). Fair Shares highlighted several specific benefits of doing things together including: reciprocal help, fulfilment, and opportunities to socialise.

GL4 CIC aims to bring cultural activities to the community and Read with Me is about improving children's reading. Both organisations have been supported by GGT. This allows them to deliver the outcomes in terms of community connection, wellbeing and people 'raising their aspirations' through doing things together.

Connecting to other support and services (TPI: participation)

At GL11, the person-centred approach to meal recipients enabled them to look out for opportunities to connect them with other services, or to opportunities such as carpentry activities or befriending schemes. Bikes, transport, technology and football activities were also provided to support asylum seekers with connectivity and physical activity.

Social networks (TPI: community cohesion)

All Network partners contribute to strengthening social networks in communities. The ways in which partners deepen relationships are outcomes in themselves, but also underpin the delivery of other outcomes for participants.

Fair Shares activities allow people to feel a sense of acceptance, belonging and family. They sometimes also want to bring in other family members/friends to be part of the organisation, thereby expanding others' networks.

Some participants in GCBC activities were experiencing loneliness and isolation after Covid. The Recycled Teenagers group participants enjoyed the social aspect and the activities, and reported a change in mindset - feeling more open to other people and connected as a result of participation. The case studies also highlighted how activities were building social capital and belonging.

The Venture's activities enabled people to overcome loneliness after Covid, meet new people and connect with others. Participants often reported bringing in other family members to participate as well.

As organisations that facilitate the support of others, GGT and the Grace Network support groups to connect within their communities and with relevant strategic actors. GGT provided capacity building support to the Read with Me team which enabled them to build their business, fulfil their commitments and increase capacity. The Eat and Greet interactions delivered by Grace Network members provide deep connections and are intensely valued by the beneficiaries which in turn motivates the Greeter to improve to provide the best experience for the Eaters.

Wellbeing - how you feel about yourself (TPI: mental health)

Fair Shares deliver other outcomes that can contribute to a sense of wellbeing (e.g. social connection) and help people to feel that their lives have improved after a difficult period. There were strong wellbeing outcomes for both Eaters and Greeters (supported by Grace Network) as well as feeling valued and enjoying connection. This was also the case for the participants in the activities at the Engine (supported by Grace Network). The Venture delivered direct health and wellbeing outcomes through the provision of healthy food. Their activities also contributed to growing confidence and self-esteem. Fair Shares activities created a sense of purpose for participants, that they are needed and can help in ways that feel right for them. They don't always see it as altruistic but do it because it makes them feel fulfilment, self-improvement and connection.

Agency and motivation for future action (TPI: participation)

Fair Shares empowers some people to become 'ambassadors' and help others in their community outside of the projects and connecting them to help. GCBC builds momentum through connection and asking people to bring others in. This triggers a wide range of activities and ways to help or participate.

How activities are delivered is as important as what is delivered

We reviewed the case studies to look for themes in *how* work is delivered, as well as the impact that has been created.

Collective action

GCBC's case studies show evidence of connecting and empowering people to get together and improve both physical space and the sense of community and social capital (belonging, social connections and community wellbeing in particular). GL11 provides regular volunteering opportunities. Their example differed from other partners' cases in that they asked people to help in more fixed ways. However, a crucial aspect in the project to support asylum seekers was the way that GL11 was bringing different parties together to achieve common goals, by facilitating meetings and conversations.

Partnerships and deep relationships

Fair Shares has good relationships with external organisations for example, probation, which helps to deliver their work. The Grace Network's connections and networks in particular, along with the relevant expertise and the overall model, are helpful for enabling the communities they support to develop and deliver their activities and organisations. GGT's focus on building, maintaining and connecting others with strong local networks is a key strength in how they facilitate local action. The Venture facilitates local networks and develops an understanding of local needs. They nurture relationships within and between other networked organisations.

Strong organisational approach

Fair Shares has developed a strong risk management and safeguarding approach over a period of years. They have also developed their flexibility in terms of what is offered and how to be involved.

GCBC has also embedded flexibility and autonomy about how to be involved and provides support to build confidence wherever people currently are in their ability to get involved.

The Grace Network's social enterprise model encourages and facilitates all staff/volunteers to be enabled to progress and grow in their roles. The Venture and GL11 have championed and demonstrated effectiveness of community-led approaches with more top down authorities. Both organisations have an inclusive approach to engaging people.

Specialist expertise and support

Fair Shares has developed a person-centred approach and works alongside people rather than 'arms length volunteer manager'. The Venture provides a safe, non-judgemental source of advice and support. The Grace Network provides practical support, advice, connections with other organisations/support services and capacity building helps community activities to happen. Similarly, GGT's focus is on funding and support for small organisations to grow and involve others as staff and volunteers as well as benefiting the community in terms of impact and in terms of wellbeing and connection.

Credibility

GGT brought credibility and expertise to those working with them, which was valued. The Grace Network were also noted for their credibility to be asked to provide a service by the council. The Venture are respected for their expertise (e.g. in gaining funding, evaluation, website) and credibility to be awarded contracts. GL11 has sufficient credibility and expertise that the council contacted them to help when the Meals on Wheels service was at risk. Despite many challenges their proactive problem-solving approach and business acumen enabled them to respond to this call and provide meals to people who needed them.

Similarly, their local credibility/visibility led to them being approached for help by a volunteer working with local asylum seekers in a hotel.

Physical place

Fair Shares has a place to come as a 'sanctuary' for social connection and informal help/advice, although it is noted that some activities take place outside this primary space. The Venture provides safe and welcoming spaces and activities for beneficiaries.

GCBC does not have a physical space but their community builders work in the community such as in local green spaces to empower and support local people to connect and improve these spaces and their own lives.

Time

Fair Shares approach uses time and patience to let people participate in their own way at their own pace. GCBC's model allows taking as long as is necessary to become familiar with people and places and communities and build confidence and connection before taking the next step to action. The Venture benefits from a person-centred approach that may involve support over years.

Impact for communities

These insights are drawn from interviews and reflection sessions.

More broadly, **partners were able to draw down funding that directs money to local need and keeps resources in the community**. When local organisations win funding for projects and services, the money stays in the Gloucestershire economy.

Examples included:

- UK SPF funding for Hubs in Stroud which involved two Hotspots partners as well as distributing small funds for community work. This contract brought **£275,000 over three years** distributed to ten Stroud Hubs.
- A more recent success was led by Gloucestershire Gateway Trust, on behalf of over 30 local community and charity organisations, for the Gloucestershire County Council contract to deliver open access youth services in Gloucester and the Forest of Dean. This contract is worth **£640,000 per year** for the local economy for five years and will double the commissioning pot available for local organisations already working with young people (The Venture and Forest Voluntary Action Forum will lead on delivery in Gloucester and the Forest of Dean respectively). The partnership is also committed to training up people in youth work and leaving a skills legacy as well as investing in community organisations.
- This was followed up by the same partnership led by Gloucestershire Gateway Trust winning the Gloucestershire County Council contract to deliver Children and Family Hubs across the same geography. This contract is worth **£1.8m per year** and similarly will maximise community investment, bring people and partners together to create a lasting legacy.

Partners felt there had been differing successes in terms of the whole collective – as opposed to individual members – ‘irrigating the system’, one of the original aims of the Network.

‘Irrigation has worked in places where there is collective work and will from the Council to put trust [in community].’ [Network partner - interview]

There has been an **expansion of individual organisations’ work**. This was not always tied to Hotspots, sometimes it related to the VCS picking up strain on services. Partnership work included Healthier Communities Together, developing proposals for the Family Hubs and Youth provision (which have both since been awarded); and in the Food Growing Network. However, Hotspots partners noted that participation in the Network supported them in their efforts at **representation of the specific communities they work in** on district level boards – notably the Local Strategic Partnership and the Integrated Care Board.

Case study: Stroud Hubs

Two Hotspots partners and one local leader came together to advocate for the [Stroud Community Hubs Project](#). They submitted two UK Shared Prosperity Fund bids asking for 10% of all funding to go straight to community groups to both Stroud District Council and Gloucester City Councils. The latter was not successful, but learning informed the proposal for Stroud.

The UK SPF funding wasn't initially distributed to communities in Stroud. It required advocacy from Network members to work through challenges in moving money from central to local government and then distribution to civil society.

An enabling factor for eventually drawing down the funding in Stroud was that the community-led approach was seen to be 'adopted as a policy' by the Council. Members felt that they were able to influence this through the collective theory of change, a presentation at a [Gloucestershire County Council Levelling Up Conference](#) as well as the proposal. Some members also felt that the previous year of convening allowed them to have the confidence and the content to be able to advocate to make the case, particularly as the Hotspots Network is seen as a collective of important and impactful organisations.

It's a great example of [local] people on benches³ [leading work], because of this group, being given £10,000 a year for three years which is a bit nuts because they never could have got the money because they were unconstituted. That is what we want to demonstrate, prove, and then sell on.'
[Network partner - reflection meeting]

This resulted in £275,000 over three years for a model which distributes operational funding, support and data analysis directly to the grassroots. The money is distributed directly to ten Stroud Hubs from Stroud District Council, although Hotspots was the lead applicant. Stroud District Council have also funded three area facilitators to support hubs with an additional £60,000 per year for at least one year of the contract. Stroud District Council is now also channelling cost of living funding through the Hubs, working with Stroud Foodbank and Feeding Gloucestershire.

'In Stroud, they had a bit more open agendas and you had a bit more influence on them. I think Stroud is less... It's a less-dense population as well. It's easier to have an influence.' [Network partner - interview]

Partners reflected that coming together, having conversations for a year gave them the confidence to apply and be bold with their asks. They also reflected on how it was an example of supporting people where they are to come together and use the power of the collective to get resources to support local activities for their communities. This work lies at the heart of the initial aspirations for Hotspots.

³ People on benches was given as an example of where community members were engaged by partners, as well as where work is developed from. i.e. not coming from a top down source

Impact on partners

The original intention was that community members and communities benefit, but the impacts for Network partners was less clearly articulated. The reflective conversations and interviews with partners undertaken through this research process unearthed some of the original motivations and the emerging impacts for Network partners as a result of participating.

What partners wanted to get out of the Network

In the Spring of 2024, we undertook interviews with each of the partners to better understand their individual experiences. As part of this, we asked them why they originally wanted to participate – what is the benefit to an individual organisation of getting involved in a collective?

The main reasons were to:

- **Build collective strength:** aligned to their common interests, values and purpose. The Network is made up of organisations on a continuum from community building to community enterprise which can deliver in different ways in and with community. Partners wanted to move from talking about work into doing things together.
- **Build the case:** understand pathways and the links between different types of work, and build a common evaluation approach. Advocate the case to change the balance of power and ensure communities are heard.
- **Develop influence:** for the Network and members to have increased recognition and voice, underpinned by a shared vision and values.
- **Apply for funding:** bring more money into communities.

What partners got out of it

Build collective strength

Network partners described the regular meetings as providing a space for listening to other perspectives, time for learning and reflection about ways of working within the Network as well as working with other people in the ecosystem. They noted how the group shared collective values about what kind of society they wanted to build which helped to build deeper connections, even if people already had known each other for some time. Taking the time and space to learn about people, values and debrief about challenges helped some members to think about new ways of doing things.

For some, the conversations and learnings provided a direct link back to improving and adapting their own work. This included thinking bigger and more strategically. Members felt they developed more understanding about how the system works, and where there might be opportunities to intervene.

In some cases, these connections enabled people to move from knowing someone to working together to advocate collectively and individually, as well as developing ideas and delivering activities.

Develop influence

Partners felt that they had increased visibility and credibility as a result of the Network. In the case of the UK SPF conference convened by the County Council, they felt that having an identity opened doors. It is important to note that although there was sometimes a lack of clarity on the role and remit of Hotspots, the credibility of the partners and the shared identity offered access to conversations that they weren't present in before.

Build the case

Partners felt that they had increased representation across the County and in different settings. For organisations that do not have the time and resources to attend all events and gatherings, partners reported a sense of collective advocacy. That is, a sense that if another partner was in a meeting or event and it had relevance to your work, they would be able to advocate on your behalf.

What did we learn from this?

Undoubtedly all the outcomes identified for individuals, communities and partners are the starting points for building stronger and more connected communities via local groups. However, what surfaced through reflection meetings was that what the network was building in these first years was knowledge and power and there was a deliberate gear change halfway through to focus more on the learning from the model, rather than gathering evidence of impact.

Understanding process

In the Theory of Change development, partners refined the description of their approach their approach as:

- Engaging with and creating better research making the case for our model
- Using local community economic development plans
- Focussing on increasing community wealth as defined by communities
- “Irrigating” the VCSE system, through core funding community organisations and activist bodies to build their practice and delivery across the ecosystem
- Building a collaborative union of VCSE organisations

In this section, we reflect on how this process has worked in practice, in particular how local capacity is being built (including the evidence base, development plans), making the case for the model (including whether trusting relationships are being developed and the extent to which tipping points are being created). Finally, we look at how these elements have come together to irrigate the system.

The initial ideas for focusing on community wealth and building a collaborative union are not covered; the former was not carried through into work and the latter is covered in the following section which looks at the model.

The insights for this section come from reflection meetings held with Network partners in October 2022, March 2023 and December 2023, as well as a series of interviews with partners in April 2024.

Building local capacity

Building the evidence base

Partner organisations reflected on how different priorities and delivery approaches makes the process of building a collective evidence base difficult. A decision was made early on to not attempt to synthesise quantitative data, to instead collectively build on existing approaches to collecting data and storytelling noting why and how the collective is greater than the sum of the parts. Partners were not necessarily making whole scale changes to their data collection, there was more focus on tweaking and refining, whether it's slightly adapting the methodologies or thinking about how to formalise information and data that's already there. This was particularly noted in terms of being able to build the outcomes into conversations in a way that is not intrusive, isn't artificial, and focusing on the documentation of processes.

*‘The appropriate way of tracking from a methodological perspective would be a 30 year longitudinal study. That isn’t practical- so the focus is on what is possible to collect during the process. E.g. it’s not just because we want to know if they’re connected, because we think that if they feel connected now, in ten years their life would be different than if they didn’t.’
[Network partner - interview]*

It was noted in interviews with partners that some partners have low levels of data collection skills within their teams and formal processes, with most prioritising delivery of activities. Although there was collective agreement that collecting more data on impact could be useful, it was hard to prioritise what insight is most needed and could be most useful to collective endeavours. This was particularly noted in terms of the timing of gathering data and insights from community work that is slow burning and takes time.

Collecting case studies

Partners provided the following reflections from gathering case studies as part of our collective research:

- **Taking time for reflection is useful:** It was a good process to have more formal conversations with partner organisations and community members that they work with regularly but don't necessarily have the time to undertake reflective activities with. This helps in understanding how long-term support has led to local organisations growing, as well as reflecting on the inherent messiness of organising in community.
- **Making data collection fit for context needs time:** Transposing common indicators into a conversation, considering who would gather the data (if they were known and trusted by community members) and if they could add in their own insights so it was less an interview and more a process of building a story from multiple perspectives.
- **Case studies allow you to understand the journey:** Conversations with community members allowed partners to unpick exactly what point in the relationship that something changed: the event that brought people together; the critical points for deeper connection; for building something together that meets individual and collective needs.

- **They convey the time needed for these journeys.** For example, in community action, one project took four years to seed and build the work.
- **They also identify the roles that VCSE organisations play:** Partners reflected on the roles they play in doing with community members and other organisations, as well as the brokerage they offer between different systems actors.
- **Capturing processes is important:** This was noted in terms of working in partnership, particularly with statutory organisations, as well as engaging with the system more broadly to seed new ideas. Examples were shared on systemic relationships rather than interpersonal ones. Partners reflected on power, collaboration and challenging perspectives and practice. Again, the focus was on tipping points and actions which led to change. In one positive case, relocating a common meeting to a community venue to change the balance of power and therefore the focus of conversations. In another case, the longer-term negative impacts of perceived tokenistic involvement (Levelling Up Conference) was used as an example of where barriers remain to affecting change.

'What's important to understand is that the support we gave her wasn't in isolation. It wasn't that she just walked up and we gave her that support on that day. It was built upon a whole history that we had with her, because actually, we were able to help her in a way that probably no other organisation could have or would have because of the relationship we have with her.'
[Network partner - interview]

Development plans

The original proposal for Hotspots included an aspiration to embed a bottom up approach by supporting the creation of five new community economic plans over three years. Partners noted that they repurposed the funding for this to include an additional partner, The Venue, in the Network.

However, despite not using the resources to create new plans, partners did reflect on the purpose and where they have been created.

The Venue – outside of Hotspots – developed a community economic development plan which they redeveloped into a broader strategic community plan. The plan included organisations in a neighbourhood with shared aspirations about what they wanted to achieve. This was used to articulate shared objectives that could be used when joining decision making tables. They reflected on how the plan enabled them to join some strategic conversations but it didn't do what they wanted it to. They are starting the third iteration of the plan and aims to show what collective impact the organisations have in the neighbourhood, and how this links to the Council's legal obligation to link to community and neighbourhood plans.

Partners reflected on how such plans hold relevance in the planning process as part of reviewing community infrastructure and use of Section 106. They reflected on how these plans can be important if they are owned and developed within neighbourhoods. This may be something that the Network chooses to return to.

'Work needs to happen on all those levels. You can't just go 'I'm going to work on this bit'. Even though we are very different and we're doing very different bits of work, we can probably show how we are working on all those scales. Because each one of us has a certain trunk of process. From the bench to the diocese.'
[Network partner - reflection meeting]

From the bench to the diocese: building capacity at multiple levels

Partners reflected on the need to develop skills, capacity and confidence at all levels in the system. This starts from small conversations between community members in their neighbourhoods, to funders and commissioners being able to take a leap of faith and fund community activities.

Partners particularly noted that the breadth of their organisations allows them to cover many elements of the chain – from individuals to community organisations. One member felt that their organisations were supporting 'wobbly' community groups to become more resilient.

Influencing

There have been differing outcomes over the last two and a half years of delivery. Partners were able to influence in both Gloucester and Stroud Town Councils, but felt they had less success at County level. The following themes emerged from reflection conversations and interviews with each organisation.

Foundations: building internal relationships

Hotspots was conceived as a flexible network which could challenge power and make change. They perceived the 'old world' as VCSE infrastructure organisations which replicate the top down approach and give the statutory sector and others something to connect into. Hotspots Network was conceived as a more collaborative ecosystem and a more intelligent way of working together.

Network partners described how the power of this network is in its potential to demonstrate that collaboration works between organisations at different ends of the spectrum. They felt that the structure of the network provides freedom for each organisation to do their own work but also return together and share what's gone well. This relational approach was seen as a way of building the case, as well as directly influencing practice.

However, it was noted that such relationship building needs time. It needs resources for people to be able to connect. Partners felt a benefit when resources were allocated to GGT to provide coordination for the meetings and work. It was also noted that there are not many organisations in the County who can support collaboration and building relationships. Hotspots was seen as one such space to do this work – supporting members and partners to articulate their approaches, reducing separation between the concepts of strategy and doing. The latter being something that is

'I think about the quality of the network and how do you build that? That's about time. Before this was a network, there was a rich history there. [Trust] was there before we started and that's the reason that we could actually come together... I think there's also some even more meta study of what made us not become really sophisticated... It takes a lot of effort to keep a group together because life just gets in the way.'
[Network partner - interview]

seen to be artificially separate in much multi-sector collaboration and capacity building.

It was noted in interviews that there are some power imbalances in the group: some people are driving things and some are getting on with their day jobs. There is a similar imbalance in the energy for the network as a broader 'thing' that people want to invest time and resources in. This is not to make a judgement on how and why this affects the work, more to acknowledge the presence of such imbalance and the need to reflect on what it might mean for future developments.

Connecting communities and statutory organisations

Relationships: There are individual relationships between Hotspots partners and staff in strategic posts in towns, and to some extent in the County Council. Oftentimes, town council staff are closely involved in day to day work with frontline organisations. Partners referred to how some of these relationships are more than transactional, they would count some of the officers as friends and noted that they were able to communicate very frankly about decisions and approaches, even if they were not always able to change them. There is mutual respect – between partners and officers – but there is huge diversity in how people are working and the scope they have to influence practice. Lots of these relationships predate the Network, but have been enhanced as they see partners and the wider network as a source of support and sharing intelligence.

Building trust: The partners, in 2023, hoped that the emerging brand of Hotspots helped to 'bottle' the trust and integrity that is contained in the one to one relationships. In 2024, individuals reflected that the trust still lies within the one to one relationships, in that key decision makers within the city councils continue to expand their work and reliance. However, at County Level there is less representation from elected officials who understand and advocate for communities leading.

Aligning strategy and values: The partners are able to name officers who are aligned in values and long-term aspirations for the way the VCSE can contribute to communities. They felt that certain staff were 'absolutely both bought into what we say and we want to do'. In some cases, they have been able to write these aspirations into Council strategies which means that funding and resources can follow.

Sector offering: The Network wants to show that the VCSE can do capacity building for itself, that it doesn't (always) need external support with business planning and other development needs. Partners noted that there has been a power struggle with the LEP. Money was taken from the Shared Prosperity fund to offer VCSE support which focused on a strategic hub support post and not the practical hub support post. There is an opportunity in the county for more peer-to-peer support in the VCSE.

Partners felt that they were 'singing from the same hymn sheet' and within their relationships with power holders and funders they wanted to be able to start pushing back more collectively.

'One of the measures on that is the funding that comes from conversations. What are those conversations that lead to funding? Or is it simply existing? Because since I've been in Hotspots, that's been a huge change. So much of our funding comes from conversations. But it's interesting, isn't it? Because that's a really good indication of the trust of the system just to hand out money.'
[Network partner - interview]

Tipping points

Sowing the seeds for the future

A recurring theme in both case studies of community action, interviews with partners and wider community work is the importance of time and building the capacity of people and groups to be able to deliver in future, as well as respond to immediate needs. Part of the community-led approach is focused on connecting people, testing relationships and ways of working. These experiences can then lead people, groups and organisations to be in a position to ask for funding and resources.

Irrigating, or irritating, the system?

Although one of the aspirations of the group is to irrigate the system and provide more resources to communities, there is also a desire to challenge parts of the system that are not working. In reflection sessions, partners reflected on striking the balance between challenge which is necessary for change, and alienation if you challenge too much.

Identifying the blocks in the system

Partners reflected that there is a dearth of anything that is likely to remain in communities more long-term, if they do not own or have access to physical buildings. This affects the ability to do work, including for research and evaluation. In specific reference to collecting data, partners stated that you cannot do this in the street: people need to feel safe.

In terms of what is available, there is some capital investment available but it is never

enough for a whole project and there is an expectation the match will be in place. There have also been well-documented experiences of partners losing access to affordable space which is used by community groups.

Providing resource for convening

There is a lack of resources for convening groups outside of the agenda of funders, which – at present in Gloucestershire – tends towards the health and social care sector. There have been resources in the past, or collectives which sought to influence funders but these were noted to end once the statutory funded deemed them to no longer be relevant, or too challenging. One of the elements that was noted to have worked both in previous interactions as well as Hotspots was a sense of shared purpose, using place as a way of focusing attention, as well as people actively wanting to work with others. The open space of Hotspots meetings has allowed conversations to meander. The only challenge being that the conversations and ideas were not always captured.

'That Children and Family Hub, if we get it, a lot of it would have been built from the early conversations in this Hotspots Network. Making them dismantle it and redo children and young people again and again and again until they got it something approaching functional was very much influenced by people here as well.'
[Network partner - interview]

Understanding the model

In this section, we review what has been learned in terms of how the model has supported delivering local impact and systems change in Gloucestershire and what needs to be considered for replicating or scaling in the future. The insights come from reflection meetings, interviews with partners and external stakeholders from councils and other alliances.

What has been learned about the current model?

There is a lack of clarity on the purpose of Hotspots

There is a lack of clarity both within the Network and externally as to the vision, purpose and objectives of the network. There is an instinctive understanding of what the group is trying to do and why, and a belief that it is much needed to develop practice and create systemic change. There was also a sense that the group included the exact people needed for this work. However, the lack of clearly articulated objectives, and communication about what has been achieved or learned made it hard to provide a summary of exactly where Hotspots has contributed to local change. Clarity on purpose would also help new members and staff to integrate faster into the group.

'I've always struggled a little bit with the purpose of the group. I understand that the point is we want to make systems change and I'm a big advocate for that. But practically, I think I struggled to gain clarity around what we were actually doing' [Network partner - interview]

'They are absolutely like mavericks. They understand the system inside out. They have a really clear idea of what better looks like within their individual communities. They've got the ear of people to go and make that happen.' [Stakeholder - interview]

Change in practice comes from trust and relationships

There is lots to build on from existing relationships and a sense of shared purpose (even if not always articulated), for both developing ideas and delivering new activities, particularly those that expand the scope of existing organisational work. Most partners knew each other to a certain extent and the unstructured nature of the meetings allowed them to deepen relationships which then resulted in taking chances with advocacy and seeking funding. Although there was disappointment that there was not an immediate change of priorities at county level after the Levelling Up conference, some partners received feedback from others in the sector of the impact it had on them to hear a clear voice for change.

'The good news is, because we've got that supportive network of partners there's a really good support structure. There's lots of people who have got experience that I don't. So I know that although it feels great and it feels scary all at the same time, but I know that we've got a really good network of people I trust and people who are aligned with our values and working the same way we do to help us through that.' [Network partner - interview]

Beyond the Network as a whole, throughout the last two and a half years, there are many examples of where statutory partners showed increased trust in organisations' (alone or in partnership) ability to deliver. Some of this was borne of crisis and necessity in Covid – the need to quickly adapt and flexibly support communities –but this has continued through partners working in partnerships comprised of some, if not all members, winning funding for community-led delivery, for example.

***'We got the (youth contract) because of the Gateway Trust's reputation and its network of partners and the fact that we're able to deliver in a way that national organisations can't. They have taken a risk on us and it's up to us to show them what the VCSE sector can do when they are trusted and given resources.'* [Network partner - interview]**

There are shared outcomes and ways of working across the partnership

The projects qualitatively described through case studies may have different processes and formats but what they all had in common that they facilitated and supported people who had been experiencing various difficulties in life, such as loneliness and isolation, unemployment, mental health problems, to grow in confidence and skills to make a difference to their own lives and outlooks and in many cases also to their communities.

This was done in a person-centred way, sometimes over many years, providing feelings of acceptance and belonging, and sometimes a feeling like being part of a supportive family, but one that people want to bring others into. The various projects also had expertise in identifying local needs and supporting the community to meet those needs in a different way than top-down approaches, one that generated and nurtured social capital and connections as well as professional networks. Many of the projects create cascading and amplifying benefits as the success and buzz

around one event or initiative draws people in to scale up or replicate the success in a different area.

There are concrete examples of creating local impact, over and above each organisation's own impact story, and sowing the seeds for future community-led work.

There is a need for investment in facilitation

All partners are juggling many responsibilities in their own organisations. Coordination is needed to move things along and hold people to account. There are other networks that convene around sector-based needs –these collectives have funding to hold space. Hotspots adapted during delivery to use resources for coordination to drive the work forward.

***'Funding is really tough out there at the moment. So it's natural that as your own organisational stuff comes up and is maybe more challenging or more difficult, that your ability to feed into that network maybe is a bit reduced. And that's difficult because you do need that energy all the time, somebody driving it.'* [Network partner - interview]**

It is hard to find a balance between flexibility and driving things forward

Hotspots was conceived during Covid when there was a perception that things could change in terms of tipping the balance towards more community-led work, and has continued during a time of expanding needs in communities, and existing or planned reductions in funding. All partners have experienced their own changes over the funding period – whether in terms of internal changes to staff and practice or expanding their provision in response to opportunities. One of the strengths of the model has been its flexibility to let partners prioritise how they show up to support collective endeavours,

however that has led to a lack of clarity – as previously discussed – on its purpose and how best to work collectively.

Building partnerships for delivery are easier when they are focused on place or issue

One of the greatest challenges noted by partners was the challenge of finding opportunities they could respond to collectively. Several partners felt that the difference in size, location and focus was an asset in terms of bringing people together to share practice. However, this made it difficult for most partners to conceive what collective action might look like. There was a sense that convening on grounds of location (Gloucester or Stroud) or by thematic area (for example youth services) was more straightforward.

***'For me, it's about place-based. Even though we're in the same county, we're not in the same district. I don't feel that has worked in the way that maybe they had thought it could.'* [Network partner - interview]**

***'I wonder if it wouldn't work if the organisations weren't so radically different. I wonder if they were similar size and similar in work, that it would not be as successful. I think there's reassurance in the fact there's no replication. So you're not in direct competition in certain aspects, and you could share. As long as your values are the same, but the work is different. I feel like that's a good recipe for success.'* [Network partner - interview]**

But advocacy and influence can come from a broader coalition

There are examples where partners from Hotspots, acting collaboratively, have influenced people to think or act differently. The Levelling Up conference was noted as being influential to others in the sector, although it did not change the perceptions of elected officials who hold sway over funding

decisions. However, the process of building the case became the seed for more local proposals which were successful.

Although advocacy at district level tends to happen from those located there, the knowledge and insights shared in the Network – 'singing from the same hymn sheet' – has helped to develop work with districts that are open to collaboration. This is notable in Stroud for the Hubs project. Gloucester City Council is noted as being harder to influence due to a larger number of actors seeking to influence the council, as well as the political make-up of the council and historical experiences of funding more radical work in neighbourhoods.

Interviewees noted that the Network and/or collectives of partners were able to present a direct and clear ask of funders, and there was excitement that new voices were being represented, particularly when they were able to present a vision that was larger than their respective organisations. People also reflected that members were willing to take a risk, whether in terms of raising their voice or trying new practice.

Consistency of membership is ideal

However, the reality in the Community and Voluntary and Social Enterprise Sectors is that people and organisations will face constant challenges. From the demands on services, to balancing delivery and strategy, to people moving on. Strong relationships and trust were named as strengths of Hotspots. A question for partners is how to develop and nurture this whilst accepting that change will happen: what and who needs to be in place to navigate this?

***'And so navigating that, that's an important part of community life, right? That's a regular ongoing battle that we're constantly having to face. I don't think it's a negative that that's happened through this process because it's a good example of what we have to do.'* [Network partner - interview]**

What needs to be considered for replication or scaling?

Taking the learning on what has been successful – creating impact for individuals in the Network, shared insights about impacts that are created for communities, successful draw down of funding and advocacy – as well as the current VCSE ecosystem in Gloucestershire, the following opportunities and challenges were posed by interviewees.

Opportunities for development

Providing a voice

Both members and stakeholders felt that there is an opportunity for Hotspots to provide a voice that connects community and public bodies. It was noted internally and externally that there is strength in doing this when you are not funded for advocacy by those you are seeking to influence. It was noted that GGT and The Grace Network, with their funding models and scale, are already doing some of this. Some interviewees suggested exploring a more explicit campaigning approach.

This would ideally complement other collectives, whether the [VCS Alliance](#) which is an independent voice and offers support to the local VCS, or sector aligned collectives such as Healthy Communities together. It was noted that Hotspots partners are in and from communities and have a more direct connection to the citizen level which is missing in many conversations.

***'So what we're very good at between us as a group of partners is getting people around the table because people trust us and they know that we work in a transparent and equitable way. They know that we work in a way that they're aligned to and that gives us a solid reputation. We are confident that if the group was to call a bigger meeting together and invite partners in, they would come because of the relationships we have with them.'* [Network partner- interview]**

Several interviewees reflected on where Hotspots could fill gaps that are missing. Such as convening on climate change issues (more broadly than environmental) or leading in the development of strategic planning to bridge gaps between high level council strategies and what is needed to direct local action.

It was generally agreed that this does not represent a call to develop a new organisation, it is more looking for opportunities for convening and using the connections and credibility that Hotspots partners have, to bring people together to develop ideas and practice and plant seeds for future work.

'Crisis brings people together but it is good to build relationships before you need them.'

[Stakeholder - interview]

Building capacity

There is an awareness of challenges for the VCSE considering a low probability of significant increases in resources and the continuing need for collaboration. Some noted that part of the challenge the sector faces is that you are responding to a system that does not encourage collaborative ways of working. Therefore, there is a question of how to create the spaces to flexibly explore what good collective practice looks like in a way that is not detrimental to the day-to-day delivery needs of the individual organisations.

***'The community hubs are doing pretty well. And so if that's going on into the future, we need to find a way to solidify that position so that we can upskill everyone to deal with what's coming. Because I can't see, even with a change of government, that the public sector is suddenly going to have loads more money. I think we're going to be plugging the gaps and just being able to do it more consistently and reliably is what's needed.'* [Network partner - interview]**

Building the case and the evidence base

Partners reflected that there is a need to solidify the foundation of hubs and other place-based practice. The connections and influence that has developed present an opportunity to continue to develop an alternative vision and methods. However, both partners and stakeholders felt that there is still a gap in terms of making the case for transferring resources to new ways of doing things. The challenges of doing this were noted: the NHS has significant resources but is risk averse, particularly when things cannot be neatly counted and there is still a mismatch between the evidence they require and what is available. The County Council has, on the whole, been noted to have a preference for long-established national suppliers when commissioning services and has also been noted to be risk averse. Recent contracts won by GGT – outlined in the impact section – may show the beginnings of a change in direction. The qualitative case studies developed through this project, alongside partners' own evaluation data, can provide pieces of the story, but they are not the full picture that is currently needed to significantly shift decision making.

'VCSE organisations should be reflective of their communities, and I'm not sure that they are. What would be really useful to me is to say, Here's the evidence base that these services are needed. Now, go and find me some funding for it. What we are not seeing is what do people in Gloucestershire actually want? What is it they are asking for?' [Stakeholder - interview]

Convening people for commissions

There is a need for local community organisations to be able to form sufficiently robust and harmonious partnerships to respond to opportunities. It was noted by partners and stakeholders that there are few organisations that can coordinate this, and the funding model of the last ten years has not supported partnership development. There is a

particular need for organisations that can act as fiscal hosts or coordinate partnerships that meet the requirements of statutory bodies, whilst allowing community organisations to deliver context specific local work.

***'Gloucestershire as a system, I would say it's got good partnerships, good relationships between the system and the voluntary community sector. But over the last four years, we've lost pretty much every contract to an out-of-county charity, a big charity that's coming in, dominating quite extractive in terms of their practices.'* [Network partner - interview]**

What are the hurdles to overcome within the wider systems of power?

There are **different relationships at different levels of governance** and with different parts of the statutory sector. That includes tension between the community sector and the statutory sector as well as within – for example between Stroud District Council and the County Council, and between those delivering within health and social care partnerships. Each requires a different approach in terms of strategy and navigating power, particularly where the statutory sector is perceived to want to retain control and ownership.

'I just think that was perhaps the difference between one local authority who had a clear view about what they wanted to do with it and probably pretty much set their parameters before they engage with people. And another thought, well, this and here's a group of people we know and trust and like.' [Network partner - interview]

'They just said, well, we know what our community wants. We don't need the voluntary sector telling us. That's what MPs are here for. That's what councillors are here for. You're trying to do our job.' [Network partner - reflection meeting]

There is a **reliance on individual relationships** with officers which can be fruitful when there is a high level of trust, but also risks losing connection if the person moves on. It was noted that turnover at the County Council is particularly high and makes building and maintaining relationships difficult.

There is a **perception of the VCS/community organisations as being in service** of the statutory sector. They are quick to ask for support with problem solving, particularly in moments of crisis. However, these relationships have been found to sour when officers want to direct work, or rely on paternalistic approaches and micromanagement. There is also a mismatch between what is a strategic priority for the council – which can present an opportunity for co-development of solutions – and identifying need which then becomes a priority for the VCS to deal with. There is also at times a **negative perception of the public sector**, in terms of not being listened to as communities. It was also felt that there was a history of the VCS of not understanding council funding and governance models.

Finally, there is the **opportunity cost** for partners of convening and pursuing opportunities to develop and test practice. There is a question of how Hotspots can bring together groups to represent communities within systems of power, and build coalitions for delivery without it becoming a huge work burden. This is particularly the case if people perceive the current opportunities to be stacked towards organisations who favour business-as-usual approaches.

'Well, I haven't got a huge amount of time. I'm only going to get involved if I think it's going to be a decent result, because otherwise, I don't like bashing my head against a brick wall.' [Network partner - interview]

Reflections

Centre for Thriving Places was brought in as a research partner to capture learning and evidence of the impacts of the collective work of Hotspots partners in improving community resilience and power and contributing to economic growth, as well as surfacing what is working and can be applied elsewhere.

The initial aspirations of Hotspots reflect for us the time in Covid where there was a sense of possibility to make significant changes to how we allocate resources in communities and how we include communities. In that respect, we were excited to support the development of the evidence base. However, that sense of opportunity, time and energy shrank as things 'returned to normal' and our experience of walking alongside Hotspots' partners is one of adaptation to what is necessary and possible when delivering in community.

The processes we developed for gathering insights – whether in terms of collective impact, as well as reflecting on the model – were not implemented as we originally envisaged. Partners identified their changing priorities, whether in terms of what outcomes were possible, and what processes were practical. One of the reflections expressed by a partner in the interviews in April this year was that they have had many interesting conversations but they were not tracked. It is hoped that some of the reflections in this document can respond to that and be useful in deciding where to go next.

A major challenge for partners was finding the time and impetus to meet, as the collective action did not include everyone and the coordination role was implemented later in the project. It did feel at times that we were driving some of the work, even if what was originally planned no longer met the needs of the group. This was also picked up by a partner in the interviews.

***'I guess with time running out with the funding, it'll be interesting to see if we continue meeting as a group beyond next year or even after you've gone. In a way, you CTP are keeping us together. We have a reason to meet because you are wanting stuff from us because you have been commissioned. But I wonder if we would meet if you weren't there.'* [Network partner - interview]**

Whilst we haven't developed a comprehensive singular map of the impact these six organisations have on driving the conditions of thriving places, we note that the singular evidence that is needed is not easily available to make a general case. There are many sources of evidence that can support the case, such as a [rapid review of community initiatives](#) (published by the UK Government as part of the Levelling Up agenda) evidence for why [investing in community care](#) is good for health outcomes, [mobilising community assets](#) can reduce health inequalities, [community agency and control](#) can be enablers of community wellbeing, [community infrastructure](#) can boost social relations and [what happens when anchors invest](#) in community businesses and many more. We hope that the specific insights we have gathered together complement the wider research available by providing a qualitative summary of what has been delivered and learned since 2022.

Developing the Hotspots Network

The following are our reflections, as Research Partner, on where Hotspots might want to direct future energy, if the partners choose to continue.

1. **Deciding how to continue as a collective:** the original reason for coming together was for advocacy and action. Both have been achieved to varying degrees of success. Partners need to now consider if and how Hotspots can evolve to meet current needs.
2. **Building the case:** Priorities have changed in terms of developing and rolling out a quantitative approach to evidencing impact of members' activities in their community. The case study process was useful for some organisations in teasing out learning on process and adding to their existing impact reporting mechanisms. However, commitment to longer-term understanding and articulation of collective change will help to continue the advocacy aims of Network members in making their case to funders and commissioners.
3. **Building voice and advocacy:** some members feel that the Network needs to offer more ideas and more assertively present models of community delivery that respond to the needs of communities, as well as building the capacity of those in power to understand what is needed to adapt their approach. This is not to replicate the work of infrastructure organisations. The focus is to influence the questions asked in the sector, not to try and corral the sector.
4. **Strengthening external communications:** work should be undertaken to create a clearer identity, with more public communications about what the Network wants to achieve, to learn, as well as what they have been learning over the past years.

'We have done a lot of work and we are now reaping those benefits. I think, truth be told, for Hotspots to keep going, there probably needs to be a breathing in, breathing out model, and we've probably breathed out. If we want to try and maintain any form of coherence, we would need to spend a bit of time coming back together again. I think that's probably where the change in busyness and life getting busy is there'll be a temptation not to come back together again.'
[Network partner - interview]

Appendices

Appendix 1: Our Methodology

What we wanted to learn:

The Hotspots Network laid out six research questions to be explored during the life course of the programme

1. How do we lay the foundations for long-lasting change? – what can we learn from this that can be repeated and used elsewhere and drive the “manifesto” for this approach?
2. What are the hurdles to overcome (emotional, institutional, historical, political) both within communities (involvement & inclusivity) and within the wider systems of power, particularly where there is already evidence of positive impact?
3. What are the roles of the different actors in the community in this area and how do they achieve/are they achieving collective impact?
4. How do we encourage and support local individuals to get started and to form new enterprises, what does it take?
5. How do we demonstrate and measure impacts in and with communities and understand what comprises ‘community wealth’. By this we mean both capturing the value of community led approaches in general and rethinking how we define wealth in relation to communities to include financial and non-financial assets that communities can hold or create.
6. How do we influence policy- and decision-makers at the local government level?

What we did

- SCOPING: Initial consultation with the key members of the HN to understand the vision and ambition for the project and set out a clear and agreed brief for the work.
- THEORY OF CHANGE AND DATA MAPPING: We delivered a Theory of Change workshop to develop a deeper understanding of the intended outcomes of the Network partners. We also met with each partner to discuss existing approaches to gathering data and capacity within teams to support this work.
- DRAFTING OF INTERIM OUTCOMES FOR THE THIRTY PERCY FUNDING PERIOD AND INITIAL FRAMEWORK SHAPE: Development of a focus for what we want to learn in this funding period, and a first draft of a bespoke Hotspots Network Framework for discussion and co-development with Network Members in September to assess the extent to which it meets needs, and is practical to apply.
- REFLECTIONS AND REFINEMENT: Through one to one conversations with Network members and a whole Network meeting, we collected feedback on the scope of the Framework and co produced guidance of how members will apply it in practice.
- FINAL FRAMEWORK & DATA TOOLS: Development of the final outline Framework, and adaptable measurement tools and research guidance for each Network organisation to use with their community from Autumn 2022.
- FACILITATING REFLECTION: Through reflective meetings and interviews with members of the Network.
- SUMMARISING LEARNING: Through presentations to members and writing a final summary report.

Appendix 2: Case study template

When? Date of case study			
What stage? How long has the person been involved / project been running			
Who/ what? Brief description of project or person. <i>For person, include relevant characteristics e.g. age, ethnicity, gender, etc; and any relevant information about occupation, family set-up, caring responsibilities, interest areas etc</i> <i>For project, include an overview of what it set out to do, how long it ran / is running, how many people it's engaging, etc.</i>			
Why? Original motivation for individual's involvement in project/ organisational work / for starting the project:			
What was it like? Overview of experience of being involved in project / organisational work / of how the project has run			
What happened as a result? Capture in narrative any sense of change or impact through individual involvement in the project/ the project's impact in wider area, on any of these areas			
Mental / Physical health (especially healthy eating; physical activity; depression)	Education and Learning (esp adult education, apprenticeships)	Quality of Employment (access to new job, or improvement in conditions or pay etc)	Local Economy (increase in number of local businesses / social enterprises, more active community groups, greater voice / influence over local economy by community)
Participation / Influence (active involvement in local organisations, sport or volunteering; having a voice beyond the community)	Neighbourhood Trust (knowing and trusting neighbours, sense of belonging, access to informal social support, connection between different parts of community)		Wellbeing (sense of life satisfaction, worth, anxiety levels, happiness)
Why did it make this happen? What activities or experiences contributed to these changes? Capture any reflections on why this project supported that change / those changes - aspects of what the project involves and how it's run; quality of relationships between project organisers and participants, or between different partners			
What about this was expected, and unexpected? Were any of the impacts 'unintended'? Any outcomes that were expected to happen, and didn't?			

Everyone deserves to live in a place where they can thrive. Centre for Thriving Places provides expert guidance, insight, practical tools and support to help measure and grow the things that really matter to everyone's lives. Our multidisciplinary teams help bring local decision makers and communities together to develop shared goals, and co-design policies, strategies and actions to achieve them.



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