GLOUCESTERSHIRE HOTSPOTS

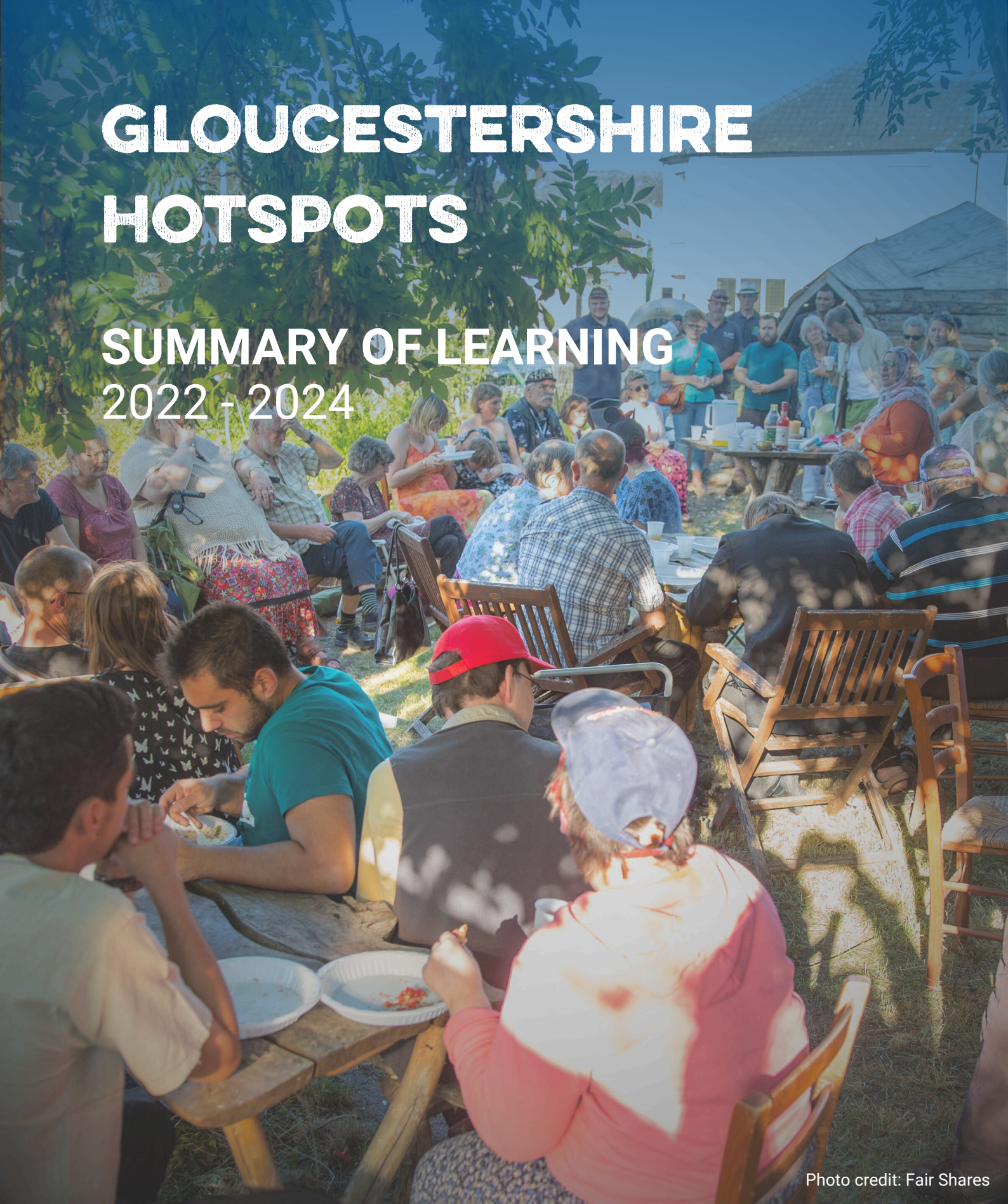## SUMMARY OF LEARNING
2022 - 2024

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CENTRE FOR
THRIVING PLACES

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.

Photo credit: GCBC

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 intended to:

- Capture learning, impact and evidence of economic growth and improved community resilience and power resulting from changes brought about by 'Hotspot Communities'[1]
- Capture and surface individual organisational working practices, what works well and what can be universalised and applied elsewhere.

This short report sets out some of what has been learned from two years through this research 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.

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.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF THE HOTSPOTS NETWORK

There were six common outcomes noted from case studies gathered by partners in 2023. 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.

Learning new skills

People gain skills from participation. Generating employment.

Social networks

Building connection, overcoming loneliness, building a sense of belonging, feeling valued Building social support

Doing things together

Reciprocity and fulfilment. Shared experiences and connecting.

Wellbeing - how we feel

Feeling good from participation Increasing sense of purpose & self-este

Connecting to other support and services

Connecting with other services or opportunities Enabling frontline groups to deliver activities.

Agency and motivation for future action

Ambassadors Building momentum and participation

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.

Photo credit: GGT

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.

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.

What partners got out of participating in the Network
- Build collective strength: Regular meetings provide 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. Members felt they developed more understanding about how the system works, and where there might be opportunities to intervene. In some cases, connections enabled people to move from knowing someone to working together to advocate and deliver together.
- Develop influence: Partners felt that they had increased visibility and credibility because of the Network. In the case of the Levelling Up conference, they felt that having an identity opened doors which helped them to co-create a platform for conversations.
- 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.

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.

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CASE STUDY: UKSPF FUNDING FOR HUBS IN STROUD

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.

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. 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.

'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]

UNDERSTANDING THE MODEL

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 its vision, purpose and objectives. There was 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 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.

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'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.

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.

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.

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.

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?

Photo credit: GCBC

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.
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.

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.

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.

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.

Photo credit: GCBC

Photo credit: The Grace Network

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.

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.

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DEVELOPING THE NETWORK

The initial aspirations of Hotspots reflect for us as researchers 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. 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. We have therefore gathered a significant amount of rich qualitative insights that have informed this report. It is hoped that some of the reflections in this document can respond to that and be useful in deciding where to go next.

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.

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