

My Placement Experience at the Centre for Thriving Places

by Jonathan Standing

What is CTP?

The Centre for Thriving Places (CTP) is a UK charity focused on making what matters count. Instead of obsessing over traditional economic measures like GDP, CTP focuses on the things that truly improve people's lives. Their goal is to help communities thrive by developing practical tools, providing guidance, and working with councils, businesses, and communities to measure and grow wellbeing at a local level.

One of their standout tools is the Thriving Places Index (TPI), a framework that assesses the conditions needed for wellbeing in cities, towns, and regions. CTP is helping to create a wellbeing economy where progress is measured by how well people are actually doing, not just by economic growth.

Why I Chose to Work with CTP

When I was in college, I wrote my Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) on the world happiness rankings and chose to focus on the Nordic countries. I was really curious about why these countries always seemed to top the charts when it came to happiness. Digging into that question made me realise that things like GDP, which we often use as a benchmark, don't really tell the full story. They ignore inequality and don't capture what truly matters—things like happiness, wellbeing, sustainability, and quality of life. I was especially impressed and excited to hear that Liz, CTP Founder and Chief Executive, knew the people behind the world happiness rankings.

I wanted my placement to be at CTP because they challenge this status quo and make a real difference by working to influence local policy in meaningful ways. As a Quantitative-step placement student, this role also offered me the perfect opportunity to apply my quantitative research and analysis skills in a real-world setting. I was excited to contribute to projects that could directly impact communities and help shape policies that prioritise people's wellbeing.

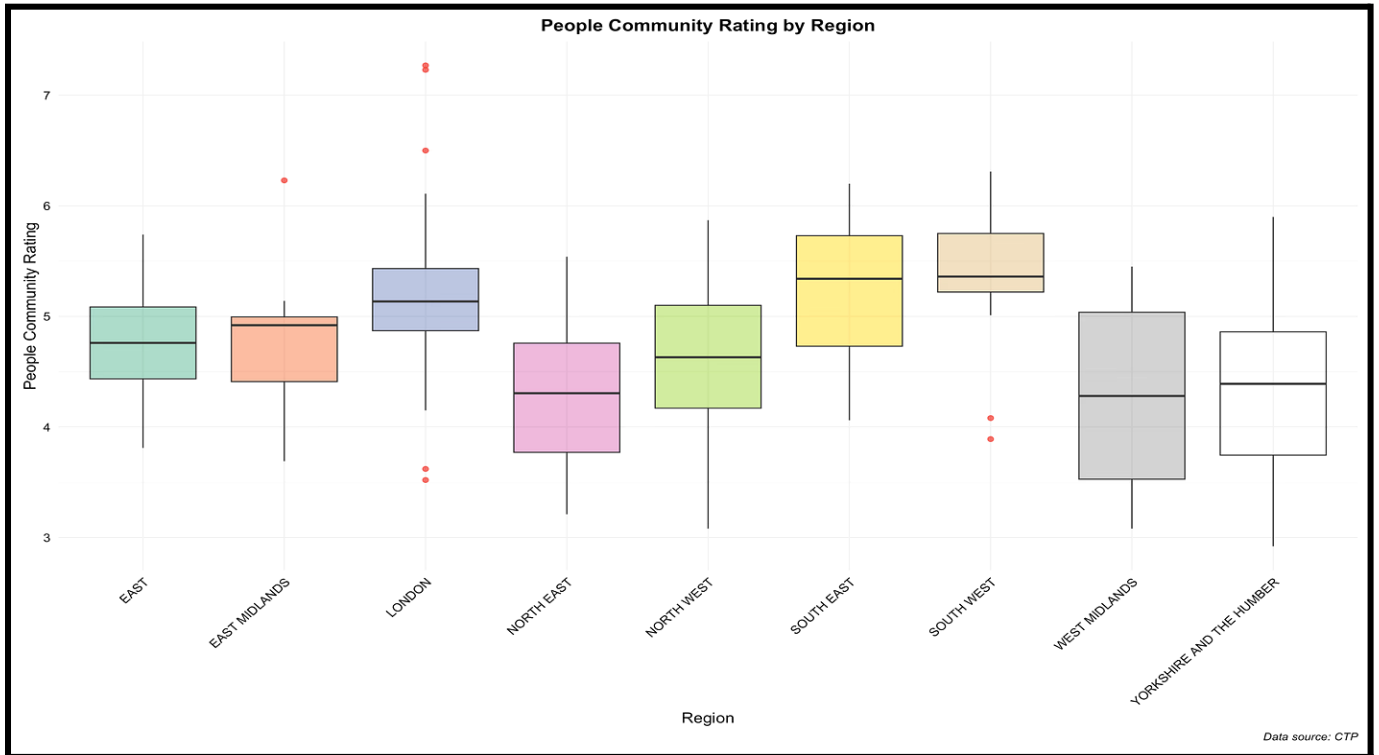
My Projects and Work

During my time at CTP, I worked on several projects that allowed me to develop my skills while contributing to the organisation's mission. One of the main projects I worked on was supporting the creation of Safety Short Reports. I spent some time cleaning and organising large datasets in Excel to use in R, creating graphs and tables to highlight trends and anomalies. I also ran statistical regression models to explore correlations between safety indicators and external factors like urban/rural areas and population demographics.

My goal was to explore the data and find interesting trends, correlations, or relationships in the data to be used in the short reports. One aspect I found particularly interesting when examining the safety indicator was that Cornwall and Plymouth stood out as clear outliers. Despite having slightly lower IMD (Index of Multiple Deprivation) scores, both areas maintained high safety scores. This suggests that while deprivation plays a significant role in influencing safety scores, there are more factors at play that contribute to these outcomes.

I also worked on supporting the People and Community Short Reports, similarly to the Safety Short Reports. Here, I focused on indicators like participation, culture, and cohesion. I produced analyses and reports to explore relationships between different factors contributing to community wellbeing.

One of the highlights was creating a correlation matrix to identify influential indicators and simplify future analysis. I really appreciate the feedback I received on my graphs, as it allowed me to explore how I could further improve my R programming skills, particularly with visualisations like the correlation matrix. I noticed something interesting when looking at the people and community indicator, London boroughs generally scored higher than the rest of England. But when I compared urban and rural areas, rural areas actually performed better than urban ones.



Finally, I worked on a Research Project that aimed to explore factors influencing community satisfaction using local area characteristics. I analysed variables like safety, internet access, unemployment, Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), and urban/rural classification to understand their impact on people and community ratings in upper-tier local authorities in England.

The analytical approach included descriptive analysis to identify trends, regression analysis to determine significance, and model assessment to identify key factors influencing community ratings.

One thing I found really interesting was the relationship between deprivation and the People and Community Rating. As areas become less deprived (wealthier), the rating actually goes down. This suggests that more deprived areas tend to score higher, possibly because they have stronger community ties or social connections. I hope that the findings from this research can help inform or inspire local authorities and policymakers about the conditions needed to foster thriving communities.

What It Was Like Working with CTP

One of the things I've loved most about my time at CTP is how much I've been able to learn and grow, both technically and personally. I've had the chance to dive into tools like Power BI through training exercises, which has been a great way to build my data visualisation skills. I've also spent a lot of time working in Excel, cleaning datasets, making sure they're compatible with R, and doing things like transposing data to get it ready for analysis. On top of this, it took some time to get familiar with all of the indicators, what they measured and to distinguish between upper tier and lower tier authorities. This part of working with data is surprisingly time consuming and not always recognised to be as valuable as the creation of the final data visual, luckily I was working with colleagues who understood this and never pressured me to produce visuals too quickly. Speaking of R, it's been amazing to put my skills to use creating data visualisations and running regression models—it's one thing to learn these techniques in a classroom, but seeing them come to life in real-world projects has been so rewarding.

What really stood out to me is the balance between structure and freedom in my role. Every Monday morning, we'd have a team meeting to outline our priorities, but beyond that, I had the flexibility to explore what I found interesting or useful. At the same time, I always felt supported by the team, who were there to guide me whenever I needed help.

The team itself is wonderful. Working for an organisation that looks beyond quantitative measures of happiness really shows in how much everyone cares for each other. I especially loved our check-in meeting, where we could share anything going on in our lives—it made the whole experience feel so personal and connected. I was always faced with big smiles whenever joining calls, even if the weather was most likely miserable outside. It was also fun to talk about how we were from all over the UK, with some people even based in mainland Europe. Another thing I've appreciated is how many opportunities I've had to keep learning. From being invited to talks to colleagues always including me in their work or offering help, I've felt constantly supported and encouraged. They even helped me with organisation while I was putting together my portfolio for my university submission, which I really appreciated. I also noticed that they moved my calls to later in the morning, which was something I especially appreciated as a uni student.

I also learnt a fun fact during my time at CTP: that you need vitamin D for antidepressants to work. It was a small but interesting insight that reflects the team's holistic approach to wellbeing. It was also nice to see that they wanted to encourage the younger generation to be involved with their mission, which made me feel valued and included.

What I've Gained

I've learnt many skills including, taking initiative by working without complete instructions, recognising how one analysis or project can contribute to future work (big-picture thinking), and evaluating how insights from one area can be applied to other projects (efficiency). These are unique skills that I have gained from working a real life placement.

Beyond all the technical skills I've gained, my time at CTP has taught me so much about myself and how I work. I have learnt to think creatively and propose new ideas. Taking ownership of tasks and proving my independence has given me a real sense of confidence in my abilities. Balancing multiple tasks on top of my university work has really pushed me to improve my time management and efficiency. I've also developed my people skills and gotten a feel for the rhythm of a workday, which has been a great introduction to the professional world. One of the most useful parts has been learning how to present complex data in a way that's accessible to non-technical audiences, which is a skill I know will be invaluable in the future. I'm really proud that I have produced work that contributes to something I truly believe in.

Although it was only a one-day-a-week work placement, CTP has given me the chance to step into the real world of work without feeling like I'd been thrown into the deep end. It's been the perfect balance of challenge and support, and I'm so grateful for everything I've learned and the connections I've made. I've just started my LinkedIn journey, so it's exciting to have some great people to connect with from CTP.

Overall, my placement at CTP has been an incredibly rewarding experience, and I'm excited to see how the skills and insights I've gained will shape my future career.

