

Community-Driven Investment: A Playbook

Learning and Insights from the Local
Community Partnerships programme

December 2025



Executive summary



The programme

The UKSPF Local Community Partnership Programme set out to strengthen social connections, build VCSE sector resilience, and empower local decision-making.

Our approach

We used a place-based, community-driven approach to explore new ways of building capacity, resilience, and engagement at a hyper-local scale.

Key elements of the programme included £4.5m in flexible funding, dedicated community developers, and strong models of partnership working.

3 key journeys

Reflections revealed three key 'journeys': from isolation to connection; from fragmentation to resilience; and from disempowerment to influence.

Things we packed

These journeys were underpinned by active trust-building, fresh participatory governance, and regular reflective practice.

Challenges included disproportionate processes and limited appetite for risk.

Future of neighbourhoods

This programme leaves a lasting legacy of strong local networks and flourishing social infrastructure, offering a blueprint for future neighbourhood-focused policy and investment.

Contents



<i>Introduction</i>	Our 3 key journeys and the things we packed	5
	Journey one: From isolated to connected	7
<i>3 key journeys</i>	Journey two: From fragmented to resilient	12
	Journey three: From disempowered to influential	16
	A flexible funding offer	21
	Place-based approach	22
	Dedicated community developer	23
	Lessons from previous work...	24
<i>Things we packed (and wished we had packed more of)</i>	...But also a broad remit with a fresh start	25
	Partnership model	26
	Vision for legacy	27
	Reflective practice	28
	Proportional processes	29
	Appetite for (some) risk	30
<i>Conclusion</i>	Future of neighbourhoods	31

Introduction

The Community Partnership programme was part of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) ‘Communities and Place’ scheme, and set out to:

- increase opportunities for people to come together to build strong and trusting relationships;
- strengthen the capacity of VCSE sector organisations to meet the needs of the local community;
- support the community to play a stronger role in shaping and making decisions on local activities and developments.

We took a place-based, community-driven approach, and in doing so we discovered a lot about what it takes to build strong, connected communities in neighbourhoods where opportunities to come together are few and far between.

This document captures the things we learned along the way, and what we think it takes to build trust, create new opportunities for connection, and leverage the decision-making power of local communities.

This playbook



What follows is an overview of the key reflections and recommendations of the North of Tyne Community Partnerships Learning and Insights Group.

Our reflections have been structured in two sections:

1. The 3 key journeys we undertook

The Community Partnership programme had 3 aims. For each of these, we explore our starting and ending points and outline the key actions and activities that marked the milestones on that journey.

2. The things we packed (and wish we had packed)

These are the elements that made the 3 journeys possible. These elements underpinned our approach and created the conditions for success. They can be adopted and utilised in future programmes with similar aims.

We conclude by looking at what’s coming next for place-based working.

Our 3 key journeys

1. From isolated to connected

Aim: to “increase opportunities for people to come together to build strong and trusting relationships”

- Put relationship-building at the heart of our approach
- Used dynamic tools and techniques to capture shifts over time
- Built trust at a grassroots level

2. From fragmented to resilient

Aim: to “strengthen the capacity of VCSE sector organisations to meet the needs of the local community”

- Started with our community groups
- Created spaces for shared learning, reflection, and celebration
- Provided ongoing and informal guidance and support

3. From disempowered to influential

Aim: to “support the community to play a stronger role in shaping and making decisions on local activities and developments”

- Established strong community-led Steering Groups
- Created opportunities for communities to make decisions
- Leveraged ‘formal’ power for community benefit

Things we packed



The following elements made these journeys possible:

1. A flexible funding offer
2. Place-based approach
3. Dedicated community developer
4. Lessons from previous work...
5. ...But also a broad remit with a fresh start
6. Partnership model
7. Vision for legacy
8. Reflective practice

There are also a few things we wish we had packed, or packed more of:

8. Proportional processes
9. An appetite for (some) risk

Spotlight 1: Rude Health, The Tute

Thanks to funding and support from the Northumberland Inclusive Economy Community Partnership, The Tute in Cambois designed and delivered bespoke creative activities with local communities, all inspired by multiple aspects of ‘health and wellbeing’.

This culminated in a month-long festival of theatre, music and dance. Activities included weekly workshops as well as performances from acclaimed artists from across the country – all for free!



Spotlight 2: Newbiggin Community Rowing Club



Skiff boat building originated in Scotland, and there are now 10 clubs along the Northumberland coast. This project created a rowing club at Newbiggin to enable local people to bring a community-built boat into the water.

Through this project, local people learned how to row, how to cox, to support each other in the boat, to learn and practice health and safety when on the water. A water-side group also linked in with as many as other groups in Newbiggin as possible.

3 key journeys



Journey one: From isolated to connected

One of the aims of the Community Partnership programme was to “increase opportunities for people to come together *to build strong and trusting relationships*”.

To do this, we:

Put relationship-building at the heart of our approach

As our partner, The Relationships Project, outlines:

Relationship-Centred Practice... unlocks potential and meets need by positioning meaningful and effective relationships as the first order goal, both as an end in itself and the means by which other goals will be achieved

In the process of doing this, we also created a strong legacy for the programme: those relationships will last beyond the end of this funding. We also ensured that local communities were able to take an active role in forging their own future.

3 key journeys



Journey one: From isolated to connected

One of the aims of the Community Partnership programme was to “increase opportunities for people to come together *to build strong and trusting relationships*”.

To do this, we:

Put relationship-building at the heart of our approach

We considered relationships at different scales to understand the full picture. Within (and between) each Community Partnership, relationships existed at different ‘levels’ and across different networks:

- Between Steering Group members
- Between funded projects
- Between funded projects and residents
- Between Local Authority and funded projects
- Between Local Authority and Steering Group members
- Between Combined Authority and Local Authorities etc...

This also came down to individuals as well as teams and organisations. A ‘relationship map’ might have looked quite different depending on who was involved – so we ensured the map was completed by as many people as possible.

3 key journeys



Journey one: From isolated to connected

One of the aims of the Community Partnership programme was to “increase opportunities for people to come together *to build strong and trusting relationships*”.

To do this, we:

Used dynamic tools and techniques to capture shifts over time

It might seem obvious to state that building relationships is a process. But understanding relationship-building as an intentional practice that takes time meant that we could build strong relationships from the earliest stages.

We used various [dynamic mapping tools](#) to build an accurate picture of the relationships that existed in each community partnership. And, by revisiting the exercise, we captured shifts over time.

Where were relationships strong, with lots of mutual trust and goodwill? Where were relationships more transactional? Where was there potential for strengthening relationships and building trust?

3 key journeys



Journey one: From isolated to connected

One of the aims of the Community Partnership programme was to “increase opportunities for people to come together *to build strong and trusting relationships*”.

To do this, we:

Built trust at a grassroots level

We know that change happens at the speed of trust, and that building trust takes time.

We took the time to build trust early on by listening to local people and providing the support they were asking for, no matter how small and informal, and whether it related directly to the Community Partnership programme or not.

Once trust had been built and the community started to feel the difference, groups were more open to and interested in the Community Partnership’s work. Collaboration and connection started from a place of mutual trust – this was the foundation of our partnership working.

Spotlight 3: Projects 4 Change

Projects4Change provides youth-led projects for young people including group work, residential and outdoor activities, as well as advice and information for 11 to 19-year olds.

This funding has supported a group of boys to explore woodwork as a creative outlet, including the carving of a totem pole for a new youth space in Cowgate.



Spotlight 4: Throckley Community Hall



The doors of Throckley Community Hall are open to all, and they knew they had more to offer the local community. With Community Partnership support, new sessions have been launched, existing activities have been refreshed, and the number of people using the Hall has risen significantly.

Now, sessions include 'Knit and Natter', Crochet class, Ukulele, Youth Clubs, coffee mornings, Irish dancing, Men@10, Bingo, dance exercise, Craft Club, and Women's Mindfulness and Mental Health Support – plus plenty more!

The Legacy of Throckley exhibition attracted over 900 people to the community centre, and many visitors shared their personal memories and heartfelt family connections. This exhibition helped bring people together, encouraged a sense of belonging, and preserved local history.

3 key journeys



Journey two: From fragmented to resilient

Our second aim was to “strengthen the capacity of VCSE sector organisations to meet the needs of the local community”.

To do this, we:

Started with our community groups

We took the time to understand how local community groups saw themselves, and made sure that our funding matched their vision.

For example, in North Tyneside a dedicated ‘youth pot’ ensured that local youth groups knew this funding was for them. Having a small grants programme also meant that local groups could engage on a scale that felt right – for example, £500 to hold a local event.

These different types of community groups were then brought into contact with one another through the Community Partnership in a way that hadn’t been fostered before. This approach helped unlock activity in different ways, and created capacity in the VCSE sector across our target communities.



3 key journeys

Journey two: From fragmented to resilient

Our second aim was to “strengthen the capacity of VCSE sector organisations to meet the needs of the local community”.

To do this, we:

Created spaces for shared learning, reflection, and celebration

Throughout the programme, we brought people together in different ways. Within each Partnership, community organisations were brought together at regular intervals to share knowledge, reflect on challenges, and celebrate their achievements. Contact details were shared across each Partnership, so that groups could contact each other directly.

We also created a ‘Learning and Insights’ group for programme leads from communities, local authorities, and the combined authority to reflect on their experiences.

These gatherings provided opportunities for collaboration and shared learning. They also allowed organisations the chance to think collectively about the future of their area.

3 key journeys



Journey two: From fragmented to resilient

Our second aim was to “strengthen the capacity of VCSE sector organisations to meet the needs of the local community”.

To do this, we:

Provided ongoing and informal guidance and support

To help community groups navigate the system, we ran information sessions and training workshops, providing guidance at every stage of the programme. Some sessions were very informal and others were more structured, and this mix allowed community groups to get the most out of the programme.

Our community developers also provided ad-hoc advice and bespoke support to those groups who needed it, at whichever stage of their journey they were at. This flexible ‘hand holding’ approach meant that community groups were able to develop and grow at a pace and in a manner that felt appropriate to them, rather than having to fit into a pre-determined model.

North Tyneside Community Partnership Celebration Event



3 key journeys



Journey three: From disempowered to influential

Our final aim was to “support the community to play a stronger role in shaping and making decisions on local activities and developments”.

To do this, we:

Established strong community-led Steering Groups

One of the first steps each Partnership took was to establish a Steering Group. Each Steering Group was chaired by a local community leader, and members were generally drawn from local community organisations, bringing expert local knowledge and strong links into their communities. Administrative support was provided by local authorities. Efforts were made to include a diverse range of local voices and groups who could share different perspectives and experiences and help to connect the funding to a wider range of community groups and residents.

Throughout the programme, each Steering Group developed a strong, independent VCSE voice, advocating for their local communities at each stage. This approach created opportunities for grassroots leadership and advocacy at a neighbourhood level, and also helped foster two-way accountability – from the funded groups to the funders, and from the CA/LA to local residents.

3 key journeys



Journey three: From disempowered to influential

Our final aim was to “support the community to play a stronger role in shaping and making decisions on local activities and developments”.

To do this, we:

Created opportunities for communities to make decisions

We spent time asking community groups what they wanted to get out of the programme, and designed this into the funding. For example, in Newcastle surveys were used to find out what people wanted in their area and these ideas were incorporated into the funding call. In North Tyneside, local community groups decided collectively how to allocate a pot of funding that had been set aside for that purpose.

These conversations helped build trust and establish two-way accountability. They also offered opportunities to engage with the community in new and creative ways.

3 key journeys



Journey three: From disempowered to influential

Our final aim was to “support the community to play a stronger role in shaping and making decisions on local activities and developments”.

To do this, we:

Leveraged ‘formal’ power for community benefit

We started with a recognition that communities have inherent power. Done well, community-driven programmes unlock that power and support the local community to navigate the formal power structures that can sometimes feel intimidating, complicated, and confusing.

Where individuals within the programme had formal power – e.g. local authority employees – we tried to recognise this and ensure that such power was being used to facilitate and support the community, to remove barriers, and to keep things moving.

We also acknowledged the need for those in positions of power to consider how to relinquish some control.

Spotlight 5: Dudley Social Supermarket



Funding and support from the North Tyneside Community Partnership has led to the opening of several new social supermarkets across the north west of the borough, including one at Dudley's Out of Sight charity.

As well as providing fresh fruit and vegetables, cupboard staples, frozen food, and recipe cards, these food hubs connect residents to warm spaces where they can socialise and take part in a wide range of regular activities.

Meanwhile, 25 young changemakers from Dudley Youth Group have started growing food to support the Dudley social supermarket.

Spotlight 6: Newcastle Dog and Cat Shelter

Newcastle Dog & Cat Shelter used their Community Partnership funding and support to replace their damaged roof in the main house and also create a new purpose-built volunteer hub, which included lockers to safely store belongings, an area for training, a kitchenette, and new tables and chairs.

Additional funding supported the implementation of a new volunteer programme, including the recruitment of a Volunteer Manager. Thanks to this, the Shelter has been able to increase their volunteering opportunities and better support their volunteers and staff with training and development.





Things we packed

The following elements made these journeys possible:

1. A flexible funding offer
2. Place-based approach
3. Dedicated community developer
4. Lessons from previous work...
5. ...But also a broad remit with a fresh start
6. Partnership model
7. Vision for legacy
8. Reflective practice

There are also a few things we wish we had packed, or packed more of:

8. Proportional processes
9. An appetite for (some) risk

Essential elements: One



A flexible funding offer

This programme was supported by just over £4.5 million from the UKSPF “Communities and Place” theme.

First, each local authority area was awarded £50,000 to co-develop their programme with local partners. Once these plans had been approved, each area received £1.5 million to fund community-driven projects that brought people together and fostered pride in place.

£400,000 of this was earmarked for capital projects, with the rest allocated for revenue projects. There was also a 10% cap on local authority costs, which helped ensure that funding for community organisations was maximised.

Beyond these parameters, each place was free to structure their funding offer as best suited their communities. As a result, the Community Partnership ‘offer’ looked slightly different in each area, and the types of activities funded also varied.

Essential elements: Two



A place-based approach

This programme focused explicitly on geographies that had (i) high levels of material deprivation and (ii) low levels of social capital – that is, opportunities for communities to come together and/or places in which the community can gather.

We took a tailored, hyper-local approach that considered the particularities of each place, and as a result each Partnership took a slightly different form.

In Newcastle, the most densely urban area, the Partnership covered 4 areas across the north and west of the city. In Northumberland, the most rural area, the Partnership covered a wide geography but focused on the most under-served LSOA's (each covering around 1500 people / 650 houses) within those places. In North Tyneside, the focus was on 3 neighbouring wards in the north west of the borough.

Within each Partnership, each neighbourhood had their own challenges and needs (as well as their own assets and strengths). The nature of investment therefore varied according to the gaps and opportunities in each community, and a rich patchwork of activity emerged that would not have been possible with a more top-down approach.

Essential elements: Three



A dedicated community developer

Each local authority recruited a community development worker to support their Partnership.

This person was a vital lynchpin, driving the Partnership's work forward by:

- Building trust with local community groups
- Acting as a systems navigator and connector, spotting opportunities to bring people together in different ways
- Supporting the Steering Group to develop a strong, independent voice for their local area
- Providing support and guidance to community groups at every stage of the programme, building capacity at a grassroots level
- Telling the 'story' of this work and raising the profile of the Partnership across the local area

Each community worker brought a wealth of experience and strong local knowledge, and their role provided stability, structure, and momentum throughout the programme.

Essential elements: Four



Lessons from previous work

In some areas, similar previous work had provided a strong foundation upon which the Community Partnership could build.

For example, in Newcastle, the Community Led Local Development programme (2017-2023) had taken a similar partnership approach and had been successful in building trust between the local authority and community groups, and between community / voluntary organisations. This history of partnership working and a legacy of mutual trust helped pave the way for the Community Partnership.

More broadly, efforts were made in every Community Partnership area to understand the landscape of local grassroots groups. By acknowledging and respecting what already existed, Community Partnerships were able to meet communities 'where they were' and build on what was already in place.

Essential elements: Five



A broad remit with a fresh start

Conversely, for some other organisations, including the combined authority, the Community Partnership approach was a new way of thinking about citizen engagement. This programme offered the chance to start something from scratch, and to explore novel and exciting ways of working.

The amount of time dedicated to scoping the project offered a real opportunity to think carefully about new and creative ways of engaging with the community. Delivery leads and Steering Groups were encouraged to engage with communities who hadn't previously been involved in local authority-led projects; doing so often required an innovative approach.

This 'new start' framing also helped to build trust between partners, community groups, and residents where existing relationships were poor. By emphasising the fact that this was a new way of working, we were able to engage with more community organisations and create meaningful conversations at a hyper-local level.

Essential elements: Six



A partnership model

Partnership working was a fundamental element of this programme, from the very earliest stages. The Combined Authority established the underlying principles for the programme in consultation with the local authorities, VCSE Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIO), and the regional VCSE support body (VONNE). In North Tyneside, the local authority and VCSE LIO VODA were joint delivery leads.

Each local authority, as the lead organisations, worked in collaboration with a broad range of organisations to develop local delivery plans, identifying the needs and opportunities in each area and how they can be addressed.

3 Steering Groups were established to oversee each Community Partnership, with members consisting mainly of representatives from community groups within the target area. Each Steering Group met regularly throughout the programme, ensuring that local partners were involved at every stage of the work. Funding panels, recruited from the Steering Groups, decided which projects would be delivered.

At each and every stage, partners and local stakeholders were fundamental to the success of the programme.

Essential elements: Seven



A vision for the legacy of this work

Delivery partners and funded groups were encouraged to think about the long-term legacy of their work at the earliest stages of the programme.

Local authorities were asked to outline an exit strategy in their initial Business Case, to ensure that the end of the programme did not pose a ‘cliff edge’ for community organisations.

Similarly, funded groups were encouraged to think about ways of continuing their work once this funding stream ended.

This programme was framed, from the beginning, as a ‘stepping stone’ for community groups to strengthen their position and increase their capacity. This approach, combined with the flexible and ongoing support provided by the local authority, helped ensure that the impact of the programme lasted beyond the funding cycle.

In particular, partners recognised early on that relationships and trust between organisations would remain in place beyond the duration of the programme. The close-knit networks that have formed within each Community Partnership will continue to drive community-led activity even now that this funding has ended.

Essential elements: Eight



Reflective practice

Throughout the programme, we created opportunities for partners to reflect on their experiences of developing and delivering their Community Partnership.

This way of working was new for the Combined Authority, and they were also keen to understand how the programme was taking shape at a community level. They convened a 'Learning and Insights Group' that included members of each of the three Community Partnerships, representatives from the Steering Groups, VCSE LIOs, and national organisations.

The Group met every 6-8 weeks throughout the final 12 months of the programme to share successes and challenges, explore ideas and opportunities, and help develop a narrative for the programme that would shed light on the brilliant work of the Partnerships.

This reflective practice also fostered trust and mutual understanding between different local authorities, VCSE groups, and the combined authority – in itself a strong legacy for the programme.

Thing we wished we had packed (or packed more of)



Proportional processes

The processes and procedures that underpin this programme were, for the most part, enforced in a standardised manner that did not account for things like grant amount or the size of a community group. As an example, a group receiving £5,000 would be asked to complete the same level of documentation as a group receiving £150,000.

This created pressure on community groups, particularly smaller groups with limited capacity and those groups which were new to this way of working. Indeed, there was at least one community group who repealed their funding application due to lack of capacity. There will no doubt also be groups who chose not to apply in the first place because they felt unable to fulfil our reporting and monitoring requirements.

Some of these monitoring and reporting requirements came from government, and were therefore unavoidable. However, where the Combined Authority and Local Authorities layered their own monitoring and reporting needs on top of this, there may be opportunities to think differently about what we ask funded partners for in the future.

Thing we wished we had packed (or packed more of)



Appetite for (some) risk

From the very beginning of this programme, we sought to find ways of fostering community-led activity and engaging with grassroots organisations in ways that were new and interesting. We wanted to explore alternatives to the traditional approaches usually taken by statutory bodies.

While we had some successes, these were hard-fought; and there were other opportunities for working differently that were not taken up. As a result, there was some discrepancy between what we were aiming to do and how we delivered it.

For example, the Combined Authority awarded funding in arrears, as per standard practice. However, some community groups were unable to cash-flow their projects and so in North Tyneside and Northumberland some funding was made available up-front for these groups. However, this process was not straightforward and created more delays in delivery.

Some fundamental questions were raised in these conversations: who carries the risk for innovative working? How can the Combined Authority better encourage different ways of working while also providing assurance and ensuring good value for public money?

The Future of Neighbourhoods



In recent years, the role of neighbourhoods in people's lives has, once again, become an important consideration for policymakers. Public sector delivery is being increasingly shaped by a place-based approach.

For example:

- The Mayor of the North East, Kim McGuinness, sits on the [Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods](#) (ICON), which is advocating for more neighbourhood-scale approaches in public policy. ICON's final policy recommendations will be published in Autumn 2025.
- The Socio-Economic Duty is due to come into effect in the next couple of years. This will require statutory bodies to consider the ways in which their work may perpetuate or tackle socio-economic disadvantage, including taking a place-based approach.
- One of the priorities of the government's [10 Year Health Plan](#) is the introduction of new neighbourhood health services
- The government's [Pride in Place Programme](#) will invest up to £5 billion of long-term support in up to 250 of "[the most in-need communities](#)" across the country

Additionally, as part of the UKSPF 'Transition Year', the Community Partnerships programme has been extended for 12 months at a reduced scale. Delivery is already underway and is due to end by March 2026.

We therefore have multiple opportunities to embed the learning from the Community Partnership programme and continue developing our approach to community-led development and activity.

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