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Evaluation of the Space to Connect programme

September 2021



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Space to Connect is a partnership between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Co-op's charity, the Co-op Foundation, to unlock the potential of community spaces where people can connect and co-operate. Between 2019 and 2021, 57 community organisations received grants totalling £1.6 million to help build social connections, address local challenges like loneliness or access to services, and expand activities.

Leeds Beckett University and Locality are Space to Connect evaluation partners. The experience of Space to Connect projects, the ambitions of the funders and the learning from the programme is captured in a variety of tools, reports and briefings available at: <https://leedsbeckett.ac.uk/spacetoconnect>



Department for
Digital, Culture,
Media & Sport



Foundation

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Views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the DCMS or any other government department, or the Co-op Foundation.

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1. Introduction

Space to Connect was a £1.6m programme jointly funded by the Co-op Foundation and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The programme aimed to build social connection (and specifically to tackle loneliness) by identifying, protecting and developing local spaces that give people opportunities to come together and initiate meaningful social action.

This report describes the original aims of the programme (and its implicit theory of change); provides an account of the programme's actual implementation, including ways in which the programme was impacted by the coronavirus pandemic; and assesses evidence of short-term outcomes and plausible pathways to achieving intended longer-term goals. It also identifies emerging lessons and themes for future work in this area.

About Space to Connect

The origins of the Space to Connect programme lay in various earlier strands of work undertaken by the Co-op Foundation and DCMS on the linked themes of community spaces and loneliness.

For example, the Co-op Foundation developed an interest-free loan scheme targeted at organisations with existing community spaces, but which needed to establish a more sustainable income stream. The experience of making those loans to develop a range of different types of spaces (including, for example, parks, woodlands and “traditional” community and leisure centres) highlighted the need to understand better what it is that allows small groups of committed individuals to make a lasting and sustainable difference to specific community spaces (and to their communities more generally). It also prompted reflection on the question of what could be done “upstream” to help more projects to reach that stage. In tandem, the Endangered Spaces campaign, launched by the Co-op and Locality in 2019, supported and improved 2,000 of the most at-risk community spaces around the UK.

The Co-op's wider fundraising and campaigning had also developed a focus on the issue of loneliness, and the Co-op Foundation also had a track record of work on this theme with young people. This led to an initial connection with the partner funder for Space to Connect – the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which had developed its interest in the relationship between community spaces and tackling isolation through the Building Connections Fund Youth strand. This involved £1m of government funding (committed through the Loneliness Strategy) to help young people to co-design improvements to local spaces to make them more welcoming.

Key themes from the vision and strategy of the Co-op itself were also relevant here, including the focus on promoting “strong communities, where people work co-operatively to make things better”.

The match-funding partnership subsequently agreed between the Co-op Foundation and DCMS in relation to Space to Connect built on these previous projects and emphases, recognising the importance of community spaces for addressing loneliness and fulfilling funding commitments from the Loneliness Strategy. Specifically, it was agreed that as a result of the programme - and in the long-term – community organisations should:

- be enabled to exchange learning and drive innovation;
- understand the needs of their community and how to meet these effectively;
- have access to the skills and assets to be able to meet those needs sustainably.

Space to Connect funding strands

To those ends, Space to Connect initially offered funding via two strands. “**Explore**” focused on encouraging or catalysing new projects. This strand involved grants of up to £10,000 and targeted organisations that wanted to consult locally about how to use an existing space, or about the needs of local communities that might be met through such a space. “**Enhance**” was focused on relatively mature community spaces and allowing them to become more financially sustainable. This might be through, for example, expanding the range or volume of activities or engaging new users. The grants involved were fewer in number, but larger at up to £50,000 per project.

Towards the end of the programme, a third strand of follow-on funding, “**Expand**”, was introduced for the projects originally funded under Explore. This strand was intended to allow projects to take forward ideas growing out of the initial consultation and engagement activity and to apply their findings on a wider scale to maximise local opportunities. The initial plan had been to offer grants of up to £30,000 as a competitive process, open to existing Explore projects, with a year to spend the funds. However, the challenges and opportunities arising from COVID-19 led the Co-op Foundation and DCMS to revise the plan and its timeframes. The revised approach involved a non-competitive, light-touch application process for a continuation grant of up to £10,000, which was available to all existing Explore grant holders.

Further detail about the type of projects funded can be found in Chapter 3.

The learning and evaluation programme

In addition to the funding and support provided directly by the Co-op Foundation, Space to Connect involved a programme of learning, project support and evaluation activity. This programme was delivered by a team based around a commissioned partner organisation,

the Centre for Health Promotion Research at Leeds Beckett University (LBU). The learning and support element was intended to help projects during the course of the programme itself, while the evaluation strand was designed to offer a retrospective account of the implementation and early outcomes of the programme.

Learning and support

The LBU team included a range of relevant academic and applied expertise in community development, community spaces and evaluation, including input from Locality, the national membership network for community organisations, which offered access to relevant networks, resources, approaches and specific tools. The broad aims of this element of the programme were to support funded organisations by providing knowledge and skills based on relevant wider sectoral experience; to facilitate knowledge exchange and sharing of experience within the programme; and to channel key messages and learning to external audiences, including organisations not funded by Space to Connect, policymakers, and other funding and commissioning bodies.

Evaluation aims and limitations

The evaluation was relatively limited in scope, and designed not as a rigorous impact assessment but a narrative account of what the programme involved and how it was implemented. Establishing reliable “before” and “after” measures of the intended long-term outcomes of the programme (such as impacts on loneliness) would have been very difficult – not least because of the relatively short time scales involved – as would have been the task of attributing any observed differences to the impact of the programme itself.

The main aims of the evaluation strand were, therefore, to:

- Capture the underlying theory of change¹ for the programme.
- Consider whether the programme was implemented as originally intended.
- Assess whether the activities and outputs associated with the project might plausibly lead to the intended short-, medium-, and longer-term outcomes.
- Identify any potential breaks in this anticipated chain of effects and unpack any key assumptions.
- Identify key learning for the funders, the projects involved and wider stakeholders (including other community projects and funders active in related fields).

¹ A theory of change is a description of why a particular way of working is expected to be effective, showing how change happens in the short, medium and long term to achieve the intended impact.

The evaluation cannot be considered wholly independent, as the LBU team had responsibility both for evaluating the programme and for delivering a core part of it (the project support and learning component).

Data sources for the evaluation

Time and resource constraints meant there was relatively little scope to collect data specifically for the evaluation. The conclusions that follow are, therefore, based largely on evidence collected by the Co-op Foundation or the LBU team during other aspects of the programme (see Chapter 3 and Appendix 2 for a more detailed description of evaluation activities). This evidence was, however, relatively wide-ranging and comprehensive in character, providing a good overview of the experiences of projects associated with the different funding strands.

For example, representatives of the vast majority of projects funded under the Explore/Expand and Enhance strands took part in either interviews or workshops as part of the learning strand of the programme, and notes from these were drawn on as part of the evaluation process. Applications and monitoring forms submitted to the Co-op Foundation were also available for all funded projects. The latter were very detailed, providing a range of descriptive information about project implementation, the impacts of COVID, and the extent to which projects felt they had been able to meet their original aims.

These data sources were supplemented by a small number of qualitative interviews, conducted specifically for the evaluation, with funders from the Co-op Foundation and DCMS and with members of the LBU team involved in designing or delivering the learning component.

About the report

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 examines the main features and assumptions underpinning the original programme design.

Chapter 3 looks at how the programme was actually implemented, describing the types of projects and activities funded, and adaptations made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 4 considers evidence of short-term outcomes resulting from the programme and how plausible it is that the intended medium- and longer-term outcomes will eventually be realised.

Chapter 5 concludes by highlighting key themes and potential lessons for other projects and funders.

2. How was the programme intended to work?

This chapter sets out some of the intentions and assumptions that originally underpinned the Space to Connect programme. It outlines the hoped-for short-, medium- and longer-term outcomes, and expectations about how these would be realised.

Underlying features and assumptions

In the period immediately prior to the pandemic, the LBU team worked with staff from the Co-op Foundation and DCMS to capture the theory of change underpinning the original programme, through an initial workshop and subsequent discussions. This was then used as a framework to assess evidence of plausible progress towards the intended outcomes.

As is often the case with such work, the discussion helped to identify several key features of and assumptions about the programme that had not previously been explicit. The most important of these are discussed below.

Seeking impact on organisations, not individuals

Although there were implicit (and sometimes explicit) theories of change associated with individual projects, neither the programme nor the evaluation was ultimately focused on whether those specific initiatives “worked” for the target populations in question. Space to Connect was primarily concerned, then, with organisation-level impacts – for example, the extent to which projects developed or became more sustainable as a result of their involvement. As such, the Co-op Foundation did not require funded organisations to demonstrate the extent to which individuals felt less isolated or lonely as a result of the projects in question.

We never went down the rabbit hole of “is whatever they did with it a good thing?” [...] We’re not casting any aspersions - good, bad, whatever - about the thing that they’ve decided to run with because we have made the good faith assumption somewhere.

[Co-op Foundation, funder interview 1](#)

Other programmes tend to focus on the individual, or the impact on the individual. Whereas for this, we were looking more broadly at community organisations being supported to work in in different or certain ways. So, it was more about the organisation than the individual [level].

[DCMS, funder interview 1](#)

Enabling and sustaining community space projects at different stages of development

The programme as a whole was intended to work with cohorts of projects at very different points in their development. While the precise nature of the programme’s engagement and support was expected to vary at each stage, the short-, medium- and long-term aims were the same: to ensure that individual projects existed where they might not otherwise have done; to increase the overall “stock” of community spaces; and thus to contribute to better connected communities with greater individual and collective wellbeing.

Given limited resources, there was also a question about whether there was a particular point in that cycle that would yield the greatest (or greater) return on investment, and where, as a funder, the most distinctive contribution might be made.

And I guess for us in the longer term to learn what's the most impactful point of the process for us to fund at. Is it funding people who are doing well? Is it funding people who don't know what they're doing yet? Where in this spectrum can we make the most effective use of our funds?

[Co-op Foundation, funder interview 1](#)

Realism about timescales and the unpredictability of local impacts

Although there was an expectation of some potentially observable short-term impacts – such as the proportion of Explore projects that go on to pursue further funding (either from the Co-op Foundation or elsewhere) – there was also a recognition that individual projects might develop over an extended period of time and, indeed, evolve into very different forms of community activity or provision from those originally envisaged.

If people go out for a conversation now, they might in 10 years' time come back to us for a loan because they've got their community asset transfer, and ten years after that they've got really embedded services in their community serving individuals where they can start to measure outcomes. But that's 20 years from now, so I think we've just had to be realistic – like what's the part that we play in this whole journey and which bits of it are we going to measure and which bits are we just going to be able to facilitate?

[Co-op Foundation, funder interview 1](#)

It was also recognised that, especially at the Explore stage, bringing people together might have not only delayed but unpredictable impacts. In short, even if the original idea did not take hold or prove viable, valuable connections might still be made, and those might lead – however indirectly – to other initiatives at some point in the future.

[Explore] really is funding that kind of engagement and consultation and it may be that nothing else really

happens with that, but I think we hypothesised that, even if it doesn't really go anywhere, people might be able to know each other, they might have met other people in their community and maybe, again a few years down the line, they might set themselves up like a book club. Who knows, but it doesn't have to be a failure if they don't then set themselves on a path to building a new community centre. It might be that they've met new people.

[Co-op Foundation, funder interview 1](#)

The underlying assumption: community spaces are good for individual and community wellbeing

While it was not necessarily expected that all the funded projects would have an immediate or direct focus or impact on loneliness, the programme did reflect an underlying assumption that community spaces create new opportunities for connections – and, ultimately, for social action – and so contribute to the general wellbeing of the people living within an area.

It will be almost working backwards from this possible assumption that friendship happens in places and group activities happen in places and having somewhere to go and talk to somebody happens in places. And without those places it's much harder to do those things and we know those things have an impact on loneliness. And almost doing the reverse maths on that to say. if those places last a little bit longer, can some more of those things happen which have positive outcomes for individuals.

Co-op Foundation, funder interview 1

The programme originally involved a clear conception of community spaces as *physical* spaces (and multi-use physical spaces in particular). As will be clear from Chapter 3, however, this was subsequently tested – and reframed to some extent – by the experience of the pandemic.

More than money: the significance of the learning and support element

The most obvious way that the programme was expected to support projects at different stages of development was through direct financial support. But the learning element was also considered critical, as a potential means of allowing projects to operate more successfully; to better meet the needs of their local communities; to identify ways to be more financially sustainable, and so on. This was envisaged partly in terms of packaging wider learning and evidence (for example, from academic studies) for use by the funded projects, but also about creating a space in which projects could learn from one another.

It was also hoped that the key messages and learning from the programme would have a wider audience – not just other projects that might subsequently apply to the Co-op for funding, but those looking to develop and sustain community spaces more generally, and indeed those who fund them.

It's not meant to be mainstream funding of the sector for funding's sake, but trialling new approaches, and piloting ways of working. So that we can build the evidence base and then make that available to the sector. So that other people can learn from the

approaches, and don't necessarily have to sink the funding into things that haven't been tested.

DCMS, funder interview 1

Capturing the theory of change

An overarching theory of change for the programme was created, which incorporated the various features and assumptions discussed above (summarised in Figure 1). This was developed in advance of the pandemic. However, in discussion with the funders, it was agreed that the fundamentals remained valid – even if conceptions of “community space” broadened as a result of COVID-19 (see Chapter 5). The theory of change (provided in Figure 1) therefore remains a helpful framework for assessing progress towards the short-, medium- and longer-term goals of the programme. Before doing that in any structured way, however, the report provides an overview of what actually happened during the implementation of the programme.

Figure 1: Theory of Change for the Space to Connect Programme

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes		
			Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
<p>Staff time – Co-op Foundation</p> <p>Funding – Co-op Foundation</p> <p>Staff time – LBU learning and evaluation team</p>	<p>Publicising the programme and encouraging applications</p> <p>Reviewing applications and selecting viable/appropriate projects</p> <p>Ongoing monitoring of and engagement with projects by Co-op team</p> <p>Engagement, evaluation and learning activities undertaken by LBU teams</p>	<p>Applications received</p> <p>Grants awarded</p> <p>Project activities undertaken (as described in bids)</p> <p>Monitoring/reflection activities completed</p> <p>Learning and engagement workshops/events held, online and offline</p> <p>Best practice and evidence summaries prepared and shared</p>	<p>Projects undertake meaningful engagement and consultation activities and establish a mandate for change (Explore)</p> <p>Projects start to move from consultation and engagement to social action (Expand)</p> <p>Projects develop plans for and undertake activity which – directly or indirectly – strengthens their financial sustainability (Enhance)</p>	<p>Community needs or possible spaces are identified (where they might not otherwise have been)</p> <p>New projects are initiated (where they might not otherwise have been)</p> <p>Existing projects are developed (where they might not otherwise have been)</p> <p>Existing projects become more financially sustainable where they might not otherwise have been</p>	<p>Funders and places are clearer about what they can do in order to support more connected communities</p> <p>The “ecosystem” of community spaces becomes healthier</p> <p>More community spaces are available</p> <p>Individual and community connections are made, leading to meaningful social action</p> <p>Communities become more nurturing, supportive, socially enriching places to live</p>

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Outcomes

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes		
			Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
	<p>Capturing experience of community organisations, particularly with regard to how they have developed a mandate for change and how they have developed plans for sustainability</p> <p>Collaboration with other interested parties – Citizens UK, Locality, Local Trust, NLGN – to share findings with local and national commissioners and funders and provide them with a framework to discuss what places can do to create a flourishing ecosystem of community spaces at a local level</p>	<p>Tools developed in partnership with projects to create a mandate for change and financial sustainability</p> <p>Project stories prepared and shared</p> <p>Evaluation surveys and interviews developed and completed</p>	<p>New connections are established within local communities, between projects in different communities and between projects and national funders/organisations</p> <p>New groups and/or isolated individuals are reached/included</p>	<p>Lessons from the funding model start to inform the thinking of other commissioners and funders</p>	<p>People have better, happier, more “liveable” lives</p>

3. The programme in practice

This chapter describes the actual implementation of the programme. It provides an overview of the funded projects and examines the progress made towards implementation of the original activity plans, both in the period before and subsequent to the COVID-19 pandemic. The data in this chapter is drawn from a range of sources, including project monitoring forms, and discussions involving project representatives and programme funders.

The projects funded

The initial funding call for the Explore and Enhance strands was launched in June 2019, and was open to UK-based charities, social enterprises and other voluntary and community organisations in connection with work to be completed anywhere in England². For Explore, grants of up to £10,000 were available. Funding for individual Enhance projects was capped at £50,000. The programme closed to applicants in July 2019 (Enhance) and August 2019 (Explore).

Expand funding offered grants of up to £10,000 on a non-competitive (and rolling) basis to all previously funded organisations funded up to 24 December 2020 to continue their work and learning from the programme. Organisations were offered considerable flexibility in terms of how their Expand grant could be spent, but it was conditional on completion within one year.

Most of the projects funded were part of established voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations and were in receipt of funding from other sources in addition to Space to Connect. Table 1 demonstrates the broad geographical spread of the funded projects.

² This geographic focus reflected the fact that the programme was associated with a policy area for which responsibility is devolved.

Table 1: Geographical distribution of funded organisations

Project Location Region	Inform	Consult
East Midlands	4	1
East of England	-	2
Greater London	8	1
North East England	2	1
North West England	10	2
South East England	5	1
South West England	4	3
West Midlands	8	-
Yorkshire and the Humber	4	-
Total	45	11

Explore

The Explore strand funded 46 projects, with awards ranging from £3,000 to £10,000 and averaging around £8,800. The total amount awarded under this strand was slightly less than £400,000.

The Explore projects were widely distributed and diverse in terms of organisational type and focus. For example, successful applicants included umbrella organisations working to support local third sector bodies in general, and small, emergent community organisations. There were projects that already had a community space of some kind and wanted to better understand how it might be used to meet the needs and priorities of the local community; and others where the focus was on identifying new or underused spaces. Among the former, there were projects with buildings

(including long-established community hubs/centres and arts venues, and facilities in the process of being renovated), and others with outdoor spaces of various kinds (including a community arboretum, parks and allotments).

There were a number of projects, with and without an existing venue, that were focused on the arts; others had an environmental or sustainability focus. There were also a small number that started from a focus on a specific section of the community, such as older people, children and young people, or a specific ethnic minority group.

The engagement methods proposed were also diverse, including structured questionnaires and door-to-door consultations, workshops and “engagement days”, fetes and other events. While most of the proposed activities involved physical interaction of some kind, a small number were based around social media or other online approaches. A large majority of projects outlined methods for canvassing the needs of the community “as a whole”, but a small number focused on engagement with particular groups, such as young people.

While all projects involved local residents or members of the community, a smaller number also sought to engage expert or professional stakeholder groups of different kinds. While some projects aimed to run a small number of sizeable events, others planned repeat or regular consultation exercises (up to 24 weekly workshops in one case). The majority of the funded Explore projects focused on the consultation stage, but some were explicit about how they intended to use the information collected – for example, to develop a business case for a new space, or establish a “local spaces network” or improvement plan.

Expand

Of the 46 Explore projects, 44 applied for and received £10,000 (plus a small top-up of £1,045) of Expand funding – an extremely high continuation rate. The total amount awarded under this strand was almost £486,000. The Expand applications reflected the diversity of the original projects.

Some projects sought to continue, extend or embed the types of consultation activities developed through the Explore funding. Others outlined activities linked directly to COVID-19 – for example, by developing new group-based online activities; developing COVID-safe, in-person “welcome back” activities; or otherwise responding to particular needs identified in the course of the pandemic. A small number of projects proposed to use the funding to develop outdoor meeting spaces or green spaces, again with reference to the ongoing requirements for social distancing.

Many of the applications, however, were not COVID-specific and there was evidence of a connection between priorities identified during the consultation work undertaken as part of Explore and the proposed next steps (this issue is covered in greater depth in Chapter 3).

Some illustrative examples of the kinds of projects funded under Explore and Expand are provided below.

Energise Sussex Coast is a community benefit co-operative based in Hastings, on the south coast of England. The group's mission is to tackle the climate crisis and energy injustice through community owned renewable power and energy saving schemes. The organisation received Explore funding to hold conversations with the community about establishing a physical space where people could find out about different environmental initiatives, such as interventions at home, recycling, and food waste. The co-operative also acts as a hub for other groups in the area concerned with environmental issues. Energise Sussex Coast then received Expand funding for a pilot hub, as well as expanding their online offer and developing a longer-term business plan.

3VA is the Voluntary Action organisation for the three districts of Wealden, Eastbourne and Lewes in East Sussex, helping to support and develop the local VCS. The organisation was awarded Explore funding to work alongside Friends of Shinewater Park and local community leaders, to engage with the public about how the park and other venues might become "spaces to connect", and help to tackle social isolation. Subsequently, funding was awarded under the Expand element to take forward various improvements to the park environment and facilities, to bring members of the community together, and to attempt to re-energise people's commitment to the space.

Bestwood Village Parish Council is based in an ex-mining community with few services. The organisation initially received Explore funding to carry out consultation with the community. One of the needs identified was for a space for different generations to come together. The group aimed to set up a space in the community centre for older and younger people to have dinner together but, because of COVID-19, this was not possible. Instead, the group set up a service delivering meals to elderly people in the community. Subsequent Expand funding has supported renovation work on the community centre and the continuation of the meal service until the end of the year (2021).

Newton Heath Youth Project is a Community Interest Company (CIC) based in the Miles Platting and Newton Health ward in Manchester – the most deprived ward in the city. The project has received Explore and Expand funding to develop a drop-in service to support older people in the community, meeting an identified need for this age group to have "somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to". Funding from Expand funded a learning centre with IT equipment for community members to use.

Enhance

Enhance funded a total of 11 projects, with the individual grants awarded ranging from roughly £34,000 to £50,000, averaging around £43,000 and totalling around £475,000.

Almost all Enhance projects were based around community hubs or spaces of some kind. Only one was primarily an outdoor space – a city farm – though it also had indoor spaces. One other project was based around an arts venue which it was hoped could be combined with broader community use. Most commonly, funding was sought to offer a new or expanded range of activities, engage with a wider population, develop an existing physical space, or enhance staffing or logistical arrangements (such as room booking or administrative systems). Less commonly, projects

proposed activities relating to understanding community needs or preferences, creating a new physical space, or improving accessibility.

Some examples of projects funded under Enhance are provided below.

Trowbridge Town Hall Trust, a “cultural and civic hub for the 21st century”, is working to re-energise an historic building at the heart of the town. The funding it received under the Enhance strand was used to put on a community fair for 100 groups; give free space to 50 community groups; commission a capital masterplan and a business plan post-development; contract a volunteer manager; and design a community newspaper.

The Bromley by Bow Centre is an integrated health and community hub, providing services and support to vulnerable groups in east London. The project used the Space to Connect funding to develop the sustainable use of four community spaces animated during Eastxchange, a skills-sharing project. This was done through three new areas of work:

1. giving one-to-one coaching and bespoke training sessions to the 43 lead volunteers to enable them to lead groups confidently and independently
2. working with partners to make their community spaces more accessible to volunteers enabling them to run activities
3. sharing Eastxchange learning and building community capacity and capability through the creation of a practical “how to” guide and theatre-based workshops for frontline staff.

The projects in practice

The progress of projects was marked by two distinct stages. Before the pandemic, most were largely able to work to their original plans. There then followed a period of severe disruption, requiring substantial adaptation.

Early implementation

The funding for both the Explore and Enhance projects began in October 2019 and was originally intended to conclude by the end of March 2020.

Of the 11 Enhance projects, almost all indicated that implementation was consistent with their original plans until the first national lockdown at the end of March 2020. Until that point, the only significant changes related to a small delay in capital expenditure on one project and a slight shift in focus for another (from planning for a community centre to planning for a community garden), when it became clear that their original plan was not affordable.

The Explore projects saw a greater degree of change to the original plans, even before COVID – perhaps not surprisingly, given that the activities involved were about understanding and responding to local needs and preferences.

Examples of amendments made by Explore projects included:

- Adapting the timing of events to better meet the needs of a particular target group (e.g. switching from breakfast events for people with dementia and their carers to events held later in the day).
- Expanding the scope of events to accommodate more or different participants (e.g. moving from an “over 50s” lunch to a “community lunch”, following interest from younger people in attending and supporting the event).
- Switching the venue for events to encourage greater engagement and participation (e.g. an arts-based project had originally intended to run creative consultation events in empty shops but decided that such venues might in fact be intimidating or off-putting, so switched to an open-air space in the central part of a local shopping centre).

A range of other relatively minor adjustments were also reported, but these generally involved changes in methods and timings rather than overall objectives.

The impact of the pandemic

As might be expected, neither projects nor the programme had clear mitigation strategies in place for a global pandemic and the complete upending of normal social interactions that it caused. The subsequent adaptations made were necessarily highly reactive, little coordinated and implemented at speed. Essentially, the pandemic comprehensively disrupted “business as usual” for almost all the organisations funded under the Space to Connect programme:

We find ourselves in an entirely different landscape to what we expected and are having to adapt so much of what we do. Every area of our work has had to change, from where our staff work and how we have meetings, to how we reach, communicate and work with our communities. Our venue, which was the central hub for sub-communities, has been closed. When it was opened briefly the cafe was closed and participants had to wait outside rather than be in a thriving, exciting environment. Everything has changed. We are having to get used to working in a continual state of flux, where there are no certainties and even short-term plans can change very quickly or be stopped in their tracks.

[Enhance monitoring form 9](#)

Immediate challenges and responses

The pandemic immediately posed a range of challenges. These included the complete or partial closure of premises (and, often, associated loss of income) and cancellation of associated activities; the loss of staff members or volunteers through shielding, self-isolation or furlough; the need to cease delivery of in-person support services to clients who were vulnerable; the challenges of rapid transition to online communication and delivery; and the risks of staff and volunteer burnout.

In the face of such challenges, organisations responded impressively quickly, albeit in a variety of ways. Some effectively shut up shop, suspending operations and closing their space until such time as it could be used to bring people together safely again. But the majority “pivoted” – adapting their spaces and wider resources for new purposes. They did so by, for example:

- Repurposing existing assets (eg community cafes as community kitchens, providing food for direct delivery to vulnerable people as part of an extended food bank round).
- Mobilising volunteers and other networks to respond to emerging local needs in new ways.
- Moving initiatives into new channels through online and telephone delivery (eg delivering English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes to asylum seekers and homework clubs for school children on Zoom; establishing or engaging with local Facebook Groups; producing podcasts; setting up a YouTube channel).
- Offering telephone support and signposting to other agencies.
- Building on existing relationships and infrastructure to offer new services and support to vulnerable groups (eg picking up prescriptions and delivering these to people who were self-isolating or shielding).

The specific activities that organisations originally intended to provide under the banner of Space to Connect were also affected, but the direct impact of COVID on these was often more limited. As described, much of the work identified in the original bids had already happened by the time the pandemic hit, although a number of projects had to cancel final activities (such as workshop or consultation events) planned for late March or beyond. Some Space to Connect activities were subsequently recast as online events, while others were written off or postponed indefinitely.

The role of flexible funding

Organisations funded under Space to Connect were generally able to adapt to the crisis and demonstrated an agile response to immediate community needs. Although such a response was mirrored across large parts of the VCS, the flexibility offered by Space to Connect undoubtedly helped to facilitate this.

Early in the first national lockdown, there was a moment where it seemed that government expenditure guidelines might create a “use it or lose it” dilemma for projects and the programme

more generally in relation to such changes of plan. However, the Co-op Foundation lobbied hard to allow participating organisations to deploy any remaining resources flexibly in response to emerging and immediate community need and this position was eventually accepted by DCMS. Organisations were given a clear message that they would not be held to their original plans and that any activity broadly consistent with the remit of the programme would be approved.

That's what we said to them, "If you are going to shift [...] as long as you're doing something that reflects in some way, the original fund that's fine, just do it." If you're using your space to help the community by allowing them to store food bank supplies – knock yourself out. It's all about the community. It's all about using the assets that you have in order to respond to this.

[Co-op Foundation, funder interview 2](#)

By the third lockdown, Explore projects were also able to access Expand funding and using it flexibly to pursue their emerging priorities.

People now have time to learn what is happening around them – we need to use this as an opportunity. We need to think of new ways of reaching people [in the past we] always relied on methods that we knew worked).

[Interview with Explore project 3](#)

COVID-19 changed everything. We were unable to access information, facilities and services to fully explore the next stage of the project. Volunteers' personal circumstances changed and we were less able to focus and push toward our goal in a more difficult and unpredictable future. However, after a pause for reflection, we have devised a different way of building community: less building-focussed and more about networks, social media and the outdoors!

[Monitoring form, Explore project 31](#)

Lost and new community connections

While the timing of the first lockdown meant that much of the planned activity had already been completed, the pandemic clearly disrupted the progress, processes and relationships that were beginning to flow from that activity. For example, some projects described a loss of important community connections or of momentum in volunteer activity (especially among young people).

Moreover, the closure of physical spaces and requirements for physical distancing had the effect of amplifying the isolation and needs of some of the most vulnerable groups. Some projects reported that their work with groups from deprived areas had suffered as a result of the move online – because of barriers to online access and issues associated with digital poverty, but also the preference of some groups for other kinds of communication.

Despite this, some of the adaptations required by COVID had unexpected benefits. The urgency of the crisis created opportunities to reach new sections of the community, and acted as an impetus or gave organisations space to do things differently. One project, for example, noted that they were using the time to ‘update resources and develop online programmes’, while another commented:

[We] feel on fire, have got no staff or service users to distract us – so getting loads done!

[Interview with Enhance project 1](#)

The move online

The move to remote working and online provision brought obvious and significant challenges. Many of the most vulnerable groups and individuals lacked the skills, equipment or connectivity to take advantage of such provision, and it proved difficult to replicate the informal, ‘drop in’ character of existing physical community spaces. There were also reports of the wellbeing of staff and volunteers suffering as a result of the physical, cognitive and emotional demands of online working.

That said, the shift online also generated some unexpected opportunities and benefits. At an organisational level, the crisis prompted rapid migration and upskilling of a kind that might otherwise have taken years; and projects reported that some individuals and groups were actually more willing and able to join virtual or remote activities than previous in-person equivalents. The pandemic resulted in projects supporting or enabling engagement among groups – such as older people –traditionally resistant/less able to access online resources.

Since lockdown, we’ve linked in with a lot more vulnerable people and at-risk people than we would have done previously. People who never came near our lunch or

exercise [classes] and who probably needed it more than the people who did come ... and I think ...it's been a blessing...we have found people who had slipped through the net...

[Interview with Explore project 8](#)

Once COVID-19 hit, we were reaching a much larger number of isolated elderly people over the phonedlines. Many hadn't heard of us before and just wanted to hear a friendly voice. Over the past months, we've built friendships to the point where people are suggesting events that they'd like to attend such as reunions for isolated people and the volunteers who have befriended them during lockdown. Older people who've never visited us before are enquiring about how to get involved.

[Interview with Explore project 8](#)

Implications for financial sustainability

Beyond the immediate challenges of the pandemic, organisations also had to grapple with longer-term implications – not least issues of financial sustainability. Almost all the organisations funded under Space to Connect reported concerns about income.

Issues of financial sustainability were sometimes more acute for the larger, longer-established organisations (such as those funded under the Enhance strand). This was because they had often pursued sustainability strategies based on generating income from their community space (eg in the form of rental, or revenues from cafes or other “commercial” activity). These income streams often dried up overnight, but the costs of maintaining spaces remained largely unchanged. In the context of lockdown, strategies originally aimed at diversification and reducing dependency on grant income had the paradoxical consequence of amplifying risk.

Smaller organisations without large assets, by contrast, were less immediately threatened in financial terms, at least in the short term. However, for all projects, there was a concern that the post-pandemic world would be characterised by greater need but fewer resources, and by heightened competition for grants and other sources of income. In sum, the pandemic changed the meaning of financial sustainability for many projects, shifting the emphasis from planning for the future to survival in the present.

We don't have any meaningful work streams coming in that will enable us to survive if things stay the way that they are.

[Interview with Explore project 15](#)

Opportunities post-COVID

Despite the understandable anxiety about financial sustainability, many projects also saw positive developments resulting from the pandemic, including new relevance, relationships and opportunities.

New and enhanced relationships

Organisations commented on how the response to the pandemic had led to new or improved relationships with partners and funders. These relationships were often experienced as less hierarchical and more collaborative than previously. There was a sense of key actors “pulling together” in new ways of working and doing so effectively.

I think because there is a much more collaborative approach [to partnership working] we are part of the locally led COVID response on mental health and that has social services, the clinical commissioning group, inpatient services [involved]... We historically wouldn't have been so involved at that level.... I think there is acknowledgment that there's a chance the impact will be better with more people communicating and being involved in those conversations ... From my perspective that's been a positive and has improved that partnership work ... I hope it survives beyond the initial emergency and recovery phase... becomes a new way of working.

[Interview with Explore project 41](#)

The shift to online working also allowed smaller organisations to make new connections outside their immediate geographical area – sometimes with large, national organisations with whom there might not previously have been any direct contact. Connecting with NCVO has been an eye-opener; being able to engage with these large national organisations using Zoom, etc.

[Interview with Explore project 22](#)

Increased demand for community spaces

A small number of Space to Connect projects were based around existing outdoor or green spaces. These organisations looked forward to, and recognised the need to plan for, increased demand post-pandemic. Other organisations operating “built” spaces were finding ways to supplement these with outdoor provision – for example, by developing adjoining gardens, courtyards or tented spaces.

People will come out of this and remember how much they value green space and being outdoors, I think we all will... and how important those community connections are. I think if there is anything we can do in readiness to meet that demand and channel that desire for people to be outside and connect [that] would be great... we really need to prepare ourselves.

[Interview with Explore project 40](#)

More broadly, there was optimism that the nature of the crisis – and the response to it – would highlight the importance of community and community organisations, and of community spaces in particular. Several organisations anticipated increased demand for their services and facilities, both because of a pent-up demand for social contact and a need for spaces that can facilitate COVID-safe interaction.

Other providers and services are going to be looking to community centres as a venue to reach out to the community, so demand will increase from these partners... Local community centres need to be trained up in how they can deal with this kind of situation.

[Interview with Explore project 39](#)

We are going to be heading into a time that is going to be tough for everyone – the answer to everything is community.

[Interview with Explore project 24](#)

Others noted that the crisis had amplified the profile of their own organisation and of the sector as a whole, or commented on the growing relevance of the focus of the Space to Connect programme.

We've been here for 10 years and no one knew about us, and now they do and know the value of our work.

[Interview with Explore project 27](#)

The Space to Connect project will now be more important than ever – focusing on social isolation and loneliness – this work is going to be really important moving forward.

[Interview with Explore project 41](#)

The implementation of the learning and support programme

As outlined in Chapter 2, the theory of change underpinning the programme relied not only on the direct funding from the Co-op Foundation, but on a broader programme of learning, support and evaluation coordinated by the LBU team. These elements of the programme were also impacted on – and required to adapt – during the pandemic.

Early implementation

The funding for Explore and Enhance projects began in October 2019, but the contract for LBU to deliver the learning and evaluation element was not signed until December of that year. Project activity was therefore already well underway by the time that the LBU team made initial contact with organisations in late January of 2020. This meant there was limited scope to impact on or improve the initial critical stage in the work of the funded projects.

Preliminary scoping calls were carried out in January and an initial face-to-face workshop was then held for Enhance projects in February 2020 in London. Nine of the 11 projects were represented at this event, which offered an opportunity for project staff to hear about each other's work and share progress to date. Themes emerging from the discussion included factors that helped with implementation (including flexibility on the part of the funder – a theme returned to in Chapter 5) and broader learning (including methods and approaches for community engagement, and for measuring and communicating impact). There was a particular focus on issues relating to organisational resilience and sustainability. As a result, the LBU team subsequently directed projects to Locality's Lighthouse tool – an online diagnostic tool for assessing the current health of an organisation across six key areas.

The impact of COVID

It was originally envisaged that a remote workshop would be held for the Explore projects³. However, the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 disrupted plans for this as projects – and, indeed, the LBU team – were forced to rethink nearly all activity and priorities at short notice.

It was subsequently decided to undertake a series of telephone conversations with the Explore projects, to establish contact but also to understand what was happening on the ground in response to lockdown and new or changed community needs. Over the course of several weeks in April 2020, telephone interviews were conducted with 31 of the 46 projects. A summary report was then produced to distil key themes from the interviews; and identify potential implications for the programme and for the ongoing learning and evaluation activity.

Following this exercise, during the early summer months of 2020, the LBU team discussed and developed a programme of further engagement with the Space to Connect projects. This was based around the dual objectives of capturing what projects had learnt and sharing this with others; and supporting projects to reflect on their progress so far. Four specific areas of focus were identified: maintaining contact and facilitating learning; developing practical tools for projects; influencing the commissioning environment; and contributing to wider debate about the future role of the VCS in the post-pandemic era.

Subsequent activities

Story-capture workshops

In September and October 2020, the LBU team ran three online “Most Significant Change” sessions. Projects were invited to share stories related to, but not exclusively about, four themes identified through the earlier engagement:

1. Changes related to the use of digital channels to connect and support people.
2. Changes related to making community spaces more sustainable.
3. Changes related to community organisations’ responses to the pandemic.
4. Changes related to developing inclusive approaches to community spaces to address social isolation.

In total, 18 projects took part in these events, and 9 stories were shared (two by video and seven in written format). A summary was then produced, identifying key themes and learning from the stories and accompanying discussion.

³ A remote format was selected in acknowledgement of the potential difficulties that relatively small projects would face in committing the time and resources necessary to attend an in-person event.

Keeping in Touch

A series of online “Keeping in Touch” sessions (conducted between January and May 2021) offered an informal space for projects to connect and share delivery and development experiences with each other. Twelve of these sessions were held in total, with representation from 23 of the projects funded as part of the programme.

Written outputs

Other LBU outputs and activity during the second half of the programme included:

- The development and piloting of a discussion tool for commissioners based on findings from the initial round of interviews with Explore projects. This provided a format for a structured discussion at place level to consider the impact of neighbourhood-based community organisations (“community anchors”) and how their contribution might be strengthened, especially in light of the pandemic.
- A practical guide for community organisations to delivering services using digital tools. This was based on a review of existing evidence and input from two other organisations already working in this area: New Philanthropy Capital and the Good Things Foundation.
- A rapid review of 34 sources of evidence about the role of VCS organisations in connecting and supporting people through the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Evaluation opportunities

Although it had originally been intended that the LBU team would also engage directly with projects around the evaluation (e.g. via a structured online survey), it was felt that an additional request of this kind this might jeopardise engagement with other aspects of the programme. The Foundation’s routine monitoring activities were therefore used as a key source of information and feedback.

4. The theory of change revisited

This chapter revisits the original aims of the programme in light of what happened during the implementation stage. In particular, it considers evidence of plausible pathways towards intended short-, medium-, and long-term impacts and whether there were significant gaps or failings in the original model. Data from various sources, including project monitoring forms and interviews with projects and programme funders, was used to reflect on these issues.

Inputs, activities and outputs

Inputs at a programme level, and early progress by projects, were largely as anticipated. Despite the pandemic, projects were able to deliver, at least to some degree, against their original aims.

Inputs and activities

Programme inputs, in terms of direct funding and staff time (from the Foundation, DCMS and the LBU team) were all as originally intended. However, there were significant staffing changes on all sides, which may have marginally affected momentum at points. In general, the funders and the learning and evaluation partner were able to provide the level of input envisaged at the outset.

Overall, the scheme attracted in excess of 800 applications. Staff from both the Foundation and DCMS considered the exercise successful in terms of both the volume, variety and quality of applications received.

I was impressed by the quality of applications that came in. The Foundation did the initial sifting and then we got the long list to go through for sifting and selection. I thought there was a really good range of a projects and a good level of quality across them. [...] I thought they were really interesting projects and well written proposals. I understood what they were trying to achieve.

DCMS funder interview 1

Most projects appear, broadly, to have delivered what they were funded to do or, at least, what they had been funded to do by the time that the pandemic hit. A small number experienced delays for various reasons and were further behind, but overall there was a high degree of congruence between original plans and reported activity during the period from October 2019 to mid-March 2020.

Project focus

The main divergences from the original project plans – for both Explore and Enhance – were associated with COVID. Projects sometimes switched to activities that were not obviously or immediately connected to community spaces, or that involved virtual spaces of various kinds. It could be argued that these changes, and the consequences of the pandemic more generally, took the program away from its core assumption: that physical community spaces (and multi-use spaces in particular) have a central role to play in building community and tackling isolation.

However, two points are worth noting here. First, the fact that projects were able to respond as effectively and flexibly as they did reflects the breadth and depth of relationships (with local communities and partners) already built up *around* such spaces. In other words, the general argument that community spaces provide a context in which meaningful social action can flourish is precisely demonstrated by the way that the organisations funded under Space to Connect were able to respond to the pandemic.

In the current COVID-19 crisis, us having this partnership in place, together with the others in our centre, has meant that we were able to move very quickly to support communities throughout Barnet. If we had been starting the partnerships from scratch, we wouldn't have got there at all!

[Monitoring form, Explore project 25](#)

There was also a sense that connections made or deepened as part of organisations' COVID response will help to support and sustain physical spaces when they are able to open up again.

Secondly, the pandemic has usefully challenged and extended understandings of what community spaces are and how they operate. In particular, it has shown that virtual spaces are “real” spaces too – insofar as they facilitate (and sometimes constrain) meaningful interactions. Both these themes are returned to and expanded on in the concluding chapter.

Learning and support

The learning and support component of the programme was less integrated and comprehensive than originally envisaged. This resulted not from a lack of effort on the part of the LBU team but from a combination of a relatively late start date, which meant that there was little opportunity to support projects during the main implementation phase, and the almost immediate subsequent arrival of the pandemic, which hindered the development of relationships between LBU and individual projects and of links across projects.

In particular, it proved difficult to identify, synthesise and share information and evidence summaries in ways that could support the skills and knowledge of projects in “real time”. For example, the original plan involved a specific aspiration to develop tools in partnership with projects to support a mandate for change and financial sustainability. This was not realised. Towards the end of the programme, three specific outputs were developed – the discussion tool for commissioners, the guide to delivering services using digital tools and the review of the role of the VCS during the pandemic. However, at the time of writing, these have not yet been finalised or widely distributed.

Over time, however, relationships were developed with many, though not all, of the funded projects. The initial phone interviews with projects generated important evidence about their experiences during the early phase of the pandemic. The “Most Significant Change” workshops proved an effective means of capturing some important narratives and learning. The subsequent “Keeping in Touch” sessions allowed emerging relationships between LBU and the funded projects to be developed further. Evidence from the monitoring forms suggested that a number of projects had found their engagement with the LBU team – and the opportunity to connect with other projects – to be useful and interesting.

Evaluation activity and outputs

As noted in the previous chapter, bespoke evaluation activity was limited. Feedback from projects was captured in relatively ad hoc ways as part of the engagement described above or in routine monitoring data collected by the Foundation. There was also little scope to provide feedback from the evaluation strand to projects during the period of funding itself, with the main output comprising the current report, only completed towards the end of the programme.

Progress towards intended short-term outcomes

Despite the challenges associated with the pandemic and, for a small number of projects, with some other specific aspects of implementation, there was solid evidence of a number of short-term outcomes being achieved.

Engagement and consultation activities

Many of the Explore projects provided convincing accounts of effective consultation and engagement activity, including concrete examples of how their Space to Connect activities had brought them into dialogue with new sections of the community and/or helped to confirm or recalibrate their views about community needs and the most effective ways of meeting those.

The fact that the vast majority of these projects were willing and able to move to the next stage of funding (Expand) is also a strong indication of progress from consultation to concrete action.

Enhanced project sustainability

There was also some evidence of progress by projects funded under Enhance towards longer-term sustainability. The pandemic has raised questions about the financial sustainability of many of these larger projects because of a reliance on using their community spaces to generate revenue (see Chapter 3 for further details). However, a number of Enhance projects were able to point to ways in which participation in Space to Connect had left them in a stronger position than would otherwise have been the case.

[T]he Town Hall is now a central part of Trowbridge's shortlisted Future High Streets Fund application. If successful, the project is earmarked to receive £8 million from central government towards its refurbishment. This wouldn't have happened if we didn't have the masterplan and business plan. Both were funded as part of this project and were central in demonstrating the viability of the organisation and the building.

[Monitoring form, Enhance project 11](#)

Despite the Centre being lockdown closed from March 20 to September 20 and then closed again for COVID-19 for the month of November 20, the capital works to refurbish the Centre have continued, although significantly delayed, and are nearly complete.

[Monitoring form, Enhance project 8](#)

There was also evidence of funded organisations becoming more sustainable in other ways – for example, through reaching a greater number or range of users, or expanding their pool of active volunteers.

The Enhance funding enabled us to give our communities access to the largest participation programme in the East of England. We were able to fill “gaps” that had previously existed in the programme to give solid progression routes from babies, to toddlers, children, adults and over 50s. The

growth and diversification of the programme gave us more opportunities to engage families, people with special educational needs and disabilities, and older people. This growth led to more people becoming part of sub-communities within our organisation.

[Monitoring form, Enhance project 9](#)

Establishing new connections at an organisational level

Projects funded under both Explore/Expand and Enhance were able to point to examples of new relationships and partnerships emerging from activity funded by Space to Connect. The experience of the pandemic – and of the Space to Connect process more generally – also often facilitated the development of relationships with other local organisations. In other words, the funded projects not only drew individuals and groups into new relationships, they often also found that their own connections widened and deepened, as evidenced by responses from the monitoring forms.

[The] emergency has presented new opportunities from relationships that have been built, through necessity and because bad policy, flaws, and gaps have been amplified, making communities more determined to put things right.

[Monitoring form, Explore project 2](#)

The project helped us to build a better working relationship with our local Community Council and the Shaping Newport project, which has led to our working with them on other Independent Arts projects and also being included in discussions about the future of the high street and representing the people and communities we work with. We are now a partner in the Shaping Newport project, which has allowed our beneficiaries to influence the plans for their high street and neighbourhood. This would not have happened without the Space to Connect project.

[Monitoring form, Explore project 28](#)

Greater reach to isolated individuals

Projects provided a range of anecdotal evidence of benefits for individual participants in terms of reduced isolation and greater social connectedness. Because of the diversity of approaches involved and the absence of rigorous project-level evaluation, it is impossible to quantify or validate such claims. Equally, however, nothing has emerged from the accounts of the projects that would undermine the programme's fundamental assumption: that community spaces facilitate meaningful social action and interaction, and thereby help to address the problems of loneliness and social isolation.

Impacts on wider stakeholders

In terms of short-term outcomes, there was less evidence of connections to or impacts on the wider sector and other funding bodies. The move online prompted by the pandemic did facilitate some contact between small community organisations and national bodies that might not otherwise have happened, but the absence of a clear set of messages from the programme as a whole meant that its scope to shape the wider sector appears – at least at the time of writing – more limited.

Pathways to medium- and longer-term outcomes

At this point, there is less scope to evidence medium- and longer-term outcomes of the programme. However, based on early outcomes, it is possible to comment on the extent to which plausible pathways to such impacts remain.

There is strong evidence from the monitoring forms that organisations funded under both the Explore and Enhance strands successfully engaged with a range of local audiences, and that the resulting understanding of community needs and preferences had begun to shape planned and actual activity.

Through our Explore funded project, we found that although there is a clear lack of community assets in [the] Wensley Fold area of Blackburn, there is huge potential to build on what is already there. We would like to use Expand funding to create a community hub at Wensley Fold Children's Centre. From discussions with the Head of Early Years in our Explore Citizens' Jury, we found that the building and carpark could be used in the evenings and weekends for community use at a very low cost.

[Monitoring form, Explore project 44](#)

Our Explore project clearly revealed that residents, groups and services wanted and needed a community space (or centre) in Cinderford. The feasibility of two potential sites was thoroughly explored with the community, and now we're in a position to take on at least one of these buildings with and for the local community.

[Monitoring form, Explore project 22](#)

As such, a number of medium-term outcomes seem plausible – for example, that community needs or possible spaces are identified; that new projects are initiated; or existing projects developed where they might not otherwise have been. The suggestion that existing projects may become more financially sustainable also appears reasonable, even in the context of the pandemic. Following their involvement in the programme, some projects may still be less financially sustainable than a year earlier, but more sustainable than they would have been without the support offered by Space to Connect.

At the time of writing, the aspiration that lessons from the funding model of Space to Connect will start to inform the thinking of other commissioners and funders has a weaker foundation. However, it may well prove possible to develop such a pathway over the coming months and years – especially via the agreed dissemination phase of the programme.

The plausibility of most of the long-term outcomes – such as the aspiration that the “ecosystem” of community spaces becomes healthier and that more community spaces are available – rests less on the evidence of impacts to date than on the fact that the programme itself is relatively small and may well be short-lived. Again, this suggests that, ultimately, the scope to influence other funders and commissioners may determine the real legacy of the programme. The forthcoming dissemination programme should therefore be monitored for evidence of reach and significance.

5. Reflections and conclusions

This chapter considers what the experience of the Space to Connect projects and the programme as a whole tell us about the role of community space initiatives and how best to encourage, enable and sustain them. It also discusses whether the pandemic has fundamentally altered such considerations. Finally, it outlines some key lessons emerging from the programme for funders and the wider sector.

Community spaces (and the activities that attach to them) matter

The experience of the organisations funded under the Space to Connect has clearly demonstrated that the core assumption of the programme – that community spaces can play a vital role in bringing people together and creating opportunities for meaningful social interaction and action – is valid. We have seen how spaces can literally provide the walls within which people meet to take part in diverse activities – ranging from exercise to food sharing to adult learning – and the benefits that flow from that.

We have also seen how even the *idea* of such spaces can motivate and engage different groups and provide a focus for discussions about community needs and preferences. The pandemic has provided a vivid illustration, if it were needed, of how meaningful and effective social action can grow out of these more mundane activities and conversations. Almost overnight, cafes became community kitchens; lunch clubs were transformed into telephone-based befriending schemes; efforts to bring people into particular spaces were turned outwards into diverse outreach efforts; and existing partnerships and connections were leveraged to respond to immediate community needs. The organisations funded by Space to Connect clearly already had a good understanding of the needs of their communities and how to meet these, but the programme provided further support for that process.

This is partly a story, of course, about the importance of the VCS in general, and its role in relation to the pandemic in particular. But in the context of this particular programme, it is important to retain the link to community space and to appreciate that, even where organisations moved beyond activities that revolved around space, they were often doing so on the basis of relationships and resources that such assets – whether community centres, gardens, cafes or city farms – have been central in fostering.

The relationship between “real” and “virtual” spaces needs rethinking

We learned that “space” was as much a state of mind as a physical entity. Once people were connected to each other, and less isolated and more confident, then the physical space they were in didn’t seem to matter so much. We could see that when groups really got going and people made good friendships, they were pleased to meet-up “anywhere”. It was the meeting-up which galvanised them.

[Monitoring form, Explore project 5](#)

For some, the pandemic had the effect of transforming understandings of (community) space and eroding any sense that virtual spaces are any less real in terms of how they are experienced. Space to Connect was originally premised on the notion that *physical* places within our communities – and particularly multi-use places – offer especially valuable opportunities for social connection and action. While many people have greatly missed such opportunities for face-to-face interaction, the experience of many Space to Connect projects during COVID has also shown that virtual spaces (whether online or through telephone contact) can usefully complement – and, in the short-term at least, substitute for – opportunities for connection in these physical spaces.

There are, of course, important barriers associated with digital literacy and access, but projects have also demonstrated that it is sometimes possible to reach sections of the population who have previously been resistant to or excluded from ‘traditional’ spaces. Indeed, in some cases, such approaches have allowed projects to expand their constituencies – for example, by reaching individuals who would have been unable or unwilling to use a physical space or by engaging with communities of interest which extend beyond the immediate geographical area. And they have shown that a range of activities, including both remote individual support (eg befriending) and group-based programmes (ranging from consultation to seated yoga) are viable using information and communication technology.

This last point raises the question of whether a wholesale adoption of online approaches may dilute the place-based approaches that community organisations have so carefully developed. Of course, the pandemic has also reinforced digital divides, leaving some individuals and groups especially vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness during a period of overwhelming reliance on online technology.

Perhaps the key lesson, then, is to think of neither physical nor virtual space as inherently inclusive or exclusive but to ask what might make individuals more willing and able to access each and to

consider the ways in which they can complement and support each other. Many Space to Connect organisations have already found value in a “blended” approach, with some sending out materials, activity packs and even refreshments in advance to run alongside online activities. This physical connection alongside the virtual can help make people feel engaged, connected and valued.

Some types of physical locations – namely, outdoor and green spaces – have been more resilient in an era of social distancing; and indeed, have been able to offer opportunities for social contact that would otherwise have been entirely absent. It is noticeable, too, that some Expand applications included provision for ostensibly indoor venues to create or extend capacity for outdoor activities – eg through developing “courtyard” facilities or tented space. Whether the demand for such facilities – and indeed other aspects of organisations’ pandemic-era operation – will shift from a short-term requirement in response to COVID restrictions to a longer-term expectation or preference remains to be seen.

The language of “projects” may have limited usefulness

Implicit in the theory of change for Space to Connect was the idea of an “ecosystem” of community spaces, comprising projects at very different stages of development – from “initial ideas” through to mature and sustainable operation. The original strands of the programme – Explore and Enhance – were conceived as interventions at either end of that spectrum, helping to catalyse new and sustain established community space projects, respectively. The Expand strand was intended to help nurture and implement some of the initial ideas emerging from Explore.

In practice, this model was diluted for a number of related reasons. The first was the fact that the community space projects that became the focus of the funding were not discrete and easily distinguished from their wider organisational context. Even those funded under the Explore strand were embedded within existing organisations and activities, rather than emerging organically from newly forged networks or connections. The organisations funded under Enhance were certainly all relatively large and well-established. The difficulty of isolating the Space to Connect element of their work was further amplified by the fact that the grants were relatively small (especially at the Explore and Expand stage, but even for Enhance, given the scale of some of the projects in question) and were often adding to rather than comprising available funding. Finally, the pandemic blurred further the line between “Space to Connect funding” and organisations’ wider activities, both as a result of the urgent pivot towards addressing the most pressing community needs and the Foundation’s willingness to support and encourage such adaptability. In fact, in giving the message that remaining funds could be spent on anything that advanced broad organisational objectives and met community need, the Space to Connect funders moved closer to a core funding model, even if the original design had been much more activity-specific.

In short, it may not always be helpful to think about small-scale funding of this kind as attaching to a discrete set of activities or easily demarcated projects. While some conventional projects of that kind may emerge, more commonly a programme like Space to Connect is likely to represent complementary or additional investment – perhaps simply allowing them to do better things they

would have been doing anyway (such as community consultation). As such, it is likely to be difficult to monitor closely the difference that such funding makes, since it may catalyse or amplify aspects of the organisation's work that extend beyond the activity formally understood as comprising "the project". One implication of this might be a case for a greater focus on funding core costs and what an organisation aims to achieve, rather than on a specific set of activities.

That said, while the Space to Connect component of organisations' work was not always distinct, the programme did offer an identity or "brand" that some organisations were able to usefully deploy in quite deliberate ways. Again, the key point here may be to offer flexibility in the extent to which organisations are expected to demarcate Space to Connect from broader activities.

Small-scale, light touch funding gives valuable freedoms

The discussion above links to a related issue. Even before the pandemic, Space to Connect was intended to be – and was experienced as – a relatively light touch programme. The funders conveyed a sense of trust in the funded organisations and did not impose highly demanding monitoring or financial reporting requirements, and offered significant support and guidance that projects clearly valued.

Following the initial lockdown, the decision to allow remaining resources to be redeployed to meet pressing community needs almost certainly meant that organisations were able to achieve additional social benefit, even if such impacts were hard to trace. While it may be an exaggeration to describe this as "no strings" funding, the fact that it was tied to a broad purpose rather than a rigid set of activities or outputs was undoubtedly welcome to the organisations concerned.

I've said it before but [it's] worth repeating - the freedom with this fund was wonderful. And the sense that there was someone supportive that we could speak to was greatly appreciated.

Monitoring form, Enhance project 11

Such feedback – which was common in the monitoring forms – raises important questions about the extent to which funders more generally seek to control how resources are used and, in doing so, underestimate the potential importance of small pots of additional funding in catalysing, unlocking or amplifying broader developments.

It is also worth noting that, although the sums involved in the programme were not large – especially in relation to the Explore strand – neither were some of the organisations involved. As such, the benefits of the funding sometimes extended beyond the activities concerned to include a degree of added credibility derived from the size and reputation of the funding bodies.

“Sustainability” may look different in the wake of the pandemic

Interestingly, when the pandemic hit, smaller organisations without large revenue-generating resources proved especially flexible and responsive. Meanwhile, existing assumptions about financial sustainability for many of the larger Enhance projects – for instance, that spaces could be used to generate stable income through rental or other “commercial” activity – were upended. While the pandemic may prove to be a once in a generation event, it has perhaps illustrated the risks of assuming that bigger is always better in terms of sustainable community spaces (and social action within the VCS more generally).

As such, it has also illustrated that the sustainability of the sector as a whole depends on having a diverse organisational ecosystem, and is not solely linked to levels of funding. Indeed, many of the accounts of sustainability provided by organisations funded under Space to Connect related to broader resources and relationships – for example, the extent to which they had been able to develop productive partnerships or a pool of active, committed volunteers. Effective consultation has a particular role to play here – both in terms of creating connections and in ensuring that provision is genuinely aligned to local needs and preferences.

It would obviously be naïve to argue that organisations should not pursue opportunities to generate regular or additional revenue from their community spaces. At the same time, however, the risks of such strategies need to be acknowledged and other aspects of sustainability (including depth of connection to local community and diversity and strength of organisational relationships) also addressed.

There is an appetite among community organisations for connection and learning

There is a potential circularity to the challenge of learning from and engaging community organisations in a programme of this kind. It can be difficult to distil key learning without securing a good level of engagement, but also difficult to encourage engagement without having useful knowledge, information and skills to share.

The organisations funded by Space to Connect were generally positive about their contact with the LBU team. However, it is not clear that the learning element of the programme had the effect of equipping projects with significant additional knowledge or skills – a key link in the original theory of change and the intended long-term outcomes of the programme. In retrospect, it would have needed to be in place earlier – offering support and guidance to projects in real time, perhaps even from the application stage onwards – for this to have happened. In practice, it took longer than anticipated to distil and package useful knowledge and to build relationships between the LBU team and the funded projects, especially in the context of the pandemic. A potentially important mechanism was, therefore, arguably never fully activated. In this context, the

programme might have benefitted from an expanded account of the learning and support element of the theory of change at an early stage.

However, over the course of the programme as a whole, there was clearly an appetite among funded projects – and especially smaller ones – for opportunities for peer connection and learning. Digital space has been significant in this respect, too, as well as in the work of individual projects, as it has allowed smaller organisations to connect with each other (and with larger organisations like the Foundation and DCMS) in ways that have been low-cost, accessible (despite distance) and broadly “democratic” – in the sense that a volunteer from a small community group has been able to join just as easily as a senior manager from a large charity.

This aspect of the programme – the opportunity to be part of a learning community of some kind – could be emphasised more fully in any similar future initiative. While the grants involved are small, they nevertheless create opportunities for new conversations and connections across geographical locations and types of projects. The benefits of such organisational connections potentially parallel those associated with individual-level connections within specific community spaces, and may extend to the development of mutually supportive relationships that are self-sustaining in the longer-term and do not require the ongoing involvement of a broker such as the team from LBU.

While there is little evidence to date that the Space to Connect programme has had a significant influence on wider audiences, such as other VCS organisations or funders, there is scope for such outcomes to be achieved – for example, via the publications associated with the programme, and the promotion of these by Locality and other channels. These will be competing for attention in a crowded landscape, but the now-agreed supplementary programme of communications and knowledge exchange activities may help to achieve the necessary cut-through.

Concluding thoughts

At the beginning of this process, the evaluation question appeared relatively straightforward: what difference can a programme of small-scale funding and support make to the inception, development and sustainability of community spaces? Initially, the COVID crisis seemed to render that question less relevant, as the retreat from shared spaces and the requirements for social distancing reduced the scope for projects to complete their planned activities and raised questions about the possibilities for any initiatives built around in-person connection.

Over time, however, the pandemic usefully challenged understandings of community space – highlighting the need to think more creatively and flexibly about the relationship between physical and virtual space. While many of the organisations funded under Space to Connect have struggled with the constraints associated with COVID, they have also found a number of positives in the adaptations they have been forced to make.

A number of other important lessons have also emerged. Among the most important of those are the following:

- The pandemic has, in important ways, validated the original premise of the programme by demonstrating the fundamental importance of sustaining a diverse infrastructure of community space and “community anchor” projects.
- The small-scale, light touch and responsive character of the funding (and its management) was roundly welcomed by participating organisations and undoubtedly helped to facilitate the speedy, flexible and effective response to COVID.
- Fluidity was also a feature of the funder’s relationship with the learning and evaluation team, which was also given scope to flex and adapt in response to the evolving character and needs of the programme. The development of a set of knowledge exchange activities to promote key outputs and messages beyond the original end date of the programme is a case in point here.
- There is a clear appetite among community organisations not only for this level and type of funding but for the opportunities for learning and connection that can accompany it – opportunities that are potentially amplified rather than constrained by the digital turn. This may have particular benefits for smaller, less well-established groups and organisations. Although it was not possible to demonstrate such benefits conclusively in the course of the current evaluation, there was ample evidence that project representatives *felt* better connected, supported and informed.
- While the relationship between the learning and evaluation team and the funded projects would ideally have been developed at an earlier stage in the process, the work that was subsequently done (including the interviews and the subsequent online “Most Significant Change” and “Keeping in Touch” sessions) did allow information and insights to flow in both directions and onwards to other audiences. The team learned about the needs and experiences of the participating organisations, and was able to capture and reflect some of that. It was also possible to develop specific outputs (such as the paper on best practice in working digitally) in response to the issues raised.
- There is value in bringing together a learning and evaluation team that contains diverse skills and experience – for example, practical knowledge of the sector, academic expertise, and understanding of programme evaluation. In the context of Space to Connect, the involvement of Locality also provided a link to national networks and organisations, and a broad awareness of how to connect the various parts of the system.
- The evaluation strand was very limited in scope. If there is a need or demand for a full impact evaluation of a future programme of this kind, this would need to be designed carefully and resourced more fully.
- Small grants may be limited in their direct impact, but Space to Connect has demonstrated that they can play an important role in connecting small organisations both with large national funders and stakeholders and with each other. As such, they contribute other kinds of capital – as well as the purely financial – which can also help to enhance sustainability.

As lockdowns are lifted and the pandemic recedes, the need for spaces (of all kinds) to *reconnect* is abundantly clear. While this programme may not have delivered all it originally set out to do, it offers some important messages for those keen to support that process:

- Be enabled to exchange learning and drive innovation.
- Understand the needs of their community and how to meet these effectively.
- Have access to the skills and assets to be able to meet those needs sustainably.

Appendix 1: Organisations funded under the Space to Connect programme

ENHANCE projects

St Werburghs City Farm STC

Exeter Community Centre Trust Ltd STC

Charles Burrell Centre Limited STC

Cheshire, Halton & Warrington Race & Equality Centre STC

Sussex Community Development Association (SCDA) Ltd STC

Trowbridge Town Hall Trust STC

Hurst Farm Social Club C.I.C. STC

The Bromley by Bow Centre STC

FISCUS North Limited STC

Liverpool and Merseyside Theatres Trust STC

The Garage Trust Ltd STC

EXPLORE and EXPAND projects (* denotes funding under Explore only)

2Faced Dance Company Limited STC

3VA STC

Acumen Community Buildings STC

African Health Policy Network STC

Age UK East London STC

Amber Valley CVS STC

Arts At The Mill CIC STC

Bangladeshi Women's Association Limited STC

Barnet Community Projects STC

Beavers Arts Ltd STC

Bestwood Village Parish Council School Heritage Working Party STC

Bickershaw Village Community Club STC

Birmingham Settlement STC

Blackburn with Darwen Healthy Living STC

Chichester Community Development Trust STC

Colebridge Trust STC

Creative Sustainability CIC STC

Cumbria Action for Sustainability STC*

Easton and Lawrence Hill Neighbourhood Management STC

Energise Sussex Coast STC

Forest Voluntary Action Forum STC

Friends of Derby Arboretum STC

Friends of KGV Prescot (Browns Field) & Carr Lane Woods STC

Gascoyne & Morningside Youth Clubs Ltd STC

Groundwork Oldham & Rochdale STC

Halifax Opportunities Trust STC

Helix Arts STC

Holbeck Elderly Aid STC

Independent Arts STC

Inspired Steps CIC STC

iSpace5 STC

Juice Community Project CiC STC

Newhampton Arts Centre STC

Newton Heath Youth Project CIC STC

Porchlight STC

Preston Muslim Forum Limited STC

STAA Limited STC

Stonegrove Community Trust STC

Thames Chase Trust STC

The Hive Live Ltd STC*

Thornton and Allerton Community Association Ltd STC

Voluntary Action Camden STC

West Cumbria Care and Support STC

Windmill Hill City Farm Ltd STC

Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council STC

Young Barnet Foundation STC

Appendix 2: Evaluation methods

As noted in Chapter 1, this exercise was not a formal impact evaluation, but an attempt to capture the original aims of the programme; tell the story of its implementation; consider emerging evidence of short- and medium-term outcomes; and identify lessons for the future. Although a small number of interviews were carried out with an explicit focus on the evaluation, most of the data were collected in the course of routine monitoring activity and engagement with projects as part of the learning and support programme.

Specifically, in attempting to document the programme and assess the plausibility of its theory of change, the evaluation drew on the following:

- A logic modelling workshop with staff from the Co-op Foundation who had been involved in the development, implementation or management of the programme.
- Individual or paired follow-up interviews in the spring and autumn of 2020 with project leads from within the Co-op Foundation and DCMS.
- Interviews undertaken in April 2020, as part of the learning element of the programme, with representatives of 31 of the organisations funded under the Explore strand.
- Summaries of the discussions at one face-to-face and several subsequent online workshops with representatives of organisations funded under either Enhance or Explore. These included three “Most Significant Change” workshops (at which 18 projects were represented) and 12 “Keeping in Touch” sessions (involving 23 projects).
- Data on numbers of applications, projects funded under each strand, location, etc, compiled by the Co-op Foundation.
- Monitoring forms completed by all funded projects towards the end of the Explore (n=46) and Enhance (n=12) elements of the programme. These were relatively detailed and contained a mix of factual information about activities and expenditure and qualitative reflections on the experience of participation in the programme.
- Application forms for funding under the Expand element of the programme (n=44).

As part of the conditions of funding, projects were required to return monitoring forms and to engage with the LBU team. In practice, however, participation in interviews and workshops was voluntary and dependent on availability.

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Locality | 33 Corsham Street, London N1 6DR | 0345 458 8336

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