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Citation:

Anderson, S and Gamsu, M and Southby, K and Bharadwa, M and Chapman, J (2021) Evaluation of Space to Connect: Summary of findings. Project Report. UNSPECIFIED. (Unpublished)

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Document Version:

Monograph (Published Version)

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Evaluation of Space to Connect: Summary of findings



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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>



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Please reference this report as:

Anderson, S., Gamsu, M., Southby, K., Bharadwa, M. and Chapman, J. (2021). *Evaluation of the Space to Connect Programme: Summary of findings*. Locality & Leeds Beckett University: London/Leeds.

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Evaluation of Space to Connect: Summary of findings

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), launched in June 2019. The programme's aim was to build social connection (and to tackle loneliness) by identifying, protecting, and developing local spaces that give people opportunities to come together and initiate meaningful social action. It will complete its funding period in January 2022.

This paper describes the background to and implementation of the programme, including ways in which it was impacted by the COVID pandemic. It also examines the extent to which Space to Connect achieved its intended outcomes and identifies key lessons and messages for community space projects, community organisations more generally, and their funders.

About Space to Connect

The origins of Space to Connect lay in previous work on community spaces, social isolation and community empowerment by the Co-op Foundation, the Co-op, and DCMS. The fund's central premise was that community spaces create opportunities for connections – and, ultimately, for meaningful social action – that might not otherwise exist, and so contribute to the general wellbeing of the people living within an area.

Space to Connect was set up to support a diverse “ecosystem” of community projects and spaces, at different stages of development and with different needs and priorities. The programme was structured around three distinct strands of funding, as described in Table A. Initially “**Explore**” and “**Enhance**” grants were available, with “**Expand**” introduced later in the programme. In addition to the funding and support provided directly by the Foundation, Space to Connect involved a programme of learning and evaluation delivered by a team based around the Centre for Health Promotion Research at Leeds Beckett University (LBU).

The programme had a number of features worth noting, especially in the context of its evaluation:

- It was primarily concerned with supporting community space projects to develop and/or become (more) sustainable, not with the ultimate impacts of those projects on the individuals using such spaces.
- Although the nature of the programme’s engagement and support was intended to vary across the different strands, the overall aims of Explore, Enhance and Expand were essentially the same. All aimed to help ensure that individual projects exist where they might not otherwise have done; increase the overall “stock” of community spaces; and contribute to better connected communities with greater individual and collective wellbeing.
- Although there was an expectation that some impacts might be evident within the short term, it was also recognised that individual projects would develop over an extended period and might ultimately evolve into forms of community activity or provision different from those originally envisaged.

- The learning and support component was intended to be central to the delivery of the programme and not simply a subsequent add-on. As such, it was hoped that it would allow projects to operate more successfully, better meet the needs of their local communities, identify ways to be more financially sustainable, and so on.

Funded projects

The initial 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 England looking to improve community spaces where people can connect and cooperate. 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.

Explore funded 46 projects, which each received an average of £8,800, with awards ranging from £3,000 to £10,000. Awards were made to a diverse range of organisations in terms of organisational type, project focus and location. For example:

- Umbrella organisations working to support a range of third sector bodies as well as small and emergent community organisations.
- Projects with an existing community space who wanted to understand how to use it more effectively to meet local community needs, along with others seeking to identify new or underused spaces.
- Projects focused on a specific topic (eg arts or the environment) or a particular section of the community (eg children or older people) versus others with a broader community remit.
- Community engagement in a variety of forms, such as through structured questionnaires, door-to-door consultations, workshops and events.¹

¹ Descriptions of some of the specific Space to Connect grant holder organisations can be found in the main report on the evaluation [LBU TEAM TO INSERT LINK TO PUBLISHED REPORT WHEN AVAILBLE](#).

Table A: Details of Space to Connect's funding strands

Fund strand	Grant amount available	No. of projects funded	Target	Aims	Anticipated short-term outcomes
Overall programme	£1.6m	57	Community projects and spaces	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.	<p>New connections are established within local communities and between projects and national funders/organisations</p> <p>New groups are formed, and isolated individuals are reached/included</p>
Explore	Up to £10k per project	46	Organisations wanting to consult locally about how to use an existing space or about local community needs that could be met through such a space	To encourage and act as a catalyst for new projects	Projects undertake meaningful engagement and consultation activities and establish a mandate for change

Fund strand	Grant amount available	No. of projects funded	Target	Aims	Anticipated short-term outcomes
Enhance	Up to £50k per project	11	Relatively mature community organisations and spaces	<p>To allow organisations to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> expand the range or volume of their activities engage new users become more financially sustainable 	Projects develop plans and undertake activity which (directly and indirectly) strengthen their financial sustainability
Expand	Up to £10k per project	44 (out of 46 Explore projects)	Existing Explore projects	Allow organisations to take forward ideas emerging from the consultation and engagement activities undertaken using 'Explore' funding	Projects start to move from consultation and engagement to social action

Enhance funded 11 projects from across England with an average grant of £43,000. Awards ranged from £34,000 to £50,000. Nearly all were based around a variety of community hubs or spaces. Most commonly, funding was sought to offer a new or expanded range of activities, engage with a wider population (eg an arts venue seeking to combine its activities with broader community use), develop an existing physical space, or enhance staffing or logistical arrangements (eg room booking or administrative systems).

Expand provided additional funding of £10,000 (plus a small top-up of £1,045) to 44 of the original 46 Explore projects – an extremely high continuation rate. 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. In line with the original Explore projects, the Expand applications also involved a range of different types of activity. Some organisations used the funding to continue, extend or embed the types of consultation activities developed through the Explore funding. Others sought funding for activities linked directly to COVID – 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.

Early implementation

Prior to the pandemic, projects largely delivered in line with their original plans. Almost all Enhance projects indicated that implementation was consistent with their original plans until the first national lockdown at the end of March 2020. Explore projects had made more adaptations to their plans, even before COVID, but these typically involved altering the methods used to engage the community, or changing the scheduling of activities rather than their overall objectives.

Impacts of the pandemic

The pandemic comprehensively disrupted "business as usual" for almost all organisations funded under the Space to Connect programme. 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. A decision was taken to extend the funding period, primarily because of the disruption caused by the COVID pandemic.

Delivery

Immediate challenges for projects 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.

Some organisations effectively shut up shop, suspending operations and closing their "space" until such time as it could be used to bring people together safely again. However, the majority

"pivoted" – using their spaces and wider resources for new purposes (like community food initiatives), and/or mobilising their volunteers and other networks to respond to emerging local needs. Others took the core of their previous work – for example, an initiative intended to tackle social isolation – and moved it into new channels, such as online or telephone contact.

Progress

The pandemic disrupted progress, processes and relationships that were beginning to flow from the original programme activity. For example, some projects described a loss of important community connections or of momentum in volunteer activity (especially among young people). The closure of physical spaces and requirements for physical distancing also had the effect of amplifying the isolation and needs of some of the most vulnerable groups. However, some adaptations required by COVID had unexpected benefits. For example, the urgency of the crisis created opportunities to reach new sections of the community, or simply a helpful impetus and space to do things differently.

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. The wellbeing of some staff and volunteers also suffered as a result of the physical, cognitive and emotional demands of online working.

But 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. Projects reported that some individuals and groups were actually more willing and able to join virtual or remote activities than previous in-person equivalents.

Financial sustainability

Not surprisingly, almost all the organisations funded under Space to Connect reported concerns about income because of COVID. Perhaps less obviously, issues of financial sustainability were often more acute for the larger, longer-established organisations (such as those funded under the Enhance strand) who had pursued sustainability strategies based on generating income from their community space – for example, in the form of rental, revenues from cafes, or other "commercial" activity.

Smaller organisations without large assets were less immediately threatened, 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 has changed the meaning of financial sustainability for many projects, shifting the emphasis from planning for the future to survival in the present.

The benefits of flexible funding

The fluidity of response demonstrated by the Space to Connect programme was facilitated by the ethos of the funders. By allowing organisations to deploy any remaining resources flexibly in response to emerging and immediate community need, organisations were given significant freedoms to adapt in line with the specific needs of their communities. Projects were essentially told that any change to their original plans that delivered activity broadly consistent with the remit of the programme would be approved.

Opportunities post-pandemic

Despite anxiety about financial sustainability, many projects also saw positive developments resulting from the pandemic which gave them new relevance, relationships and opportunities. For example, the pandemic had:

- provided some projects with valuable “headspace” – time during lockdowns that they could spend on planning and researching rather than delivery;
- led to new or improved relationships with partners and a widespread sense of key actors “pulling together” in new and effective ways;
- given smaller organisations the opportunity to make connections outside their immediate geographical area – sometimes with large, national organisations with whom there might not previously have been any direct contact.

More broadly, there was considerable optimism that the nature of the crisis – and of the response to it – would highlight the importance of community and community organisations, and of community spaces in particular.

The learning and evaluation programme

The learning and support element of the programme began work in January 2020. This too was affected by the pandemic in terms of priorities and delivery.

Opportunities to collect formal evaluation data were limited, with greater reliance placed on utilising information from the programme's routine monitoring activities. The main activity to support the evaluation strand of the learning and support programme comprised:

1. Workshops – Nine Enhance projects participated in a face-to-face workshop in February 2020. Plans for similar work with Explore projects was not possible.
2. Interviews – In place of workshops, telephone interviews were conducted with 31 Explore projects. These helped to establish project responses to lockdowns and any new or altered community needs.
3. Document reviews – Successful applications and monitoring forms were reviewed for all projects.

4. Further engagement activities – A series of activities aimed at 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 was conducted. This included 12 “Keeping in Touch” sessions, in which 23 projects participated and shared their experiences. Three “Most Significant Change” sessions were also conducted, in which 18 projects took part and shared their stories.

The main outputs from the learning and evaluation elements of the programme were:

- A discussion tool for commissioners 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 on delivering services using digital tools.
- The results of a rapid review of evidence about the role of VCS organisations in connecting and supporting people through the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These resources can be accessed online [XXXXXX INSERT LINK.](#)

Progress towards outcomes

Demand

There was clearly both a demand for funding and a sizeable pool of suitable applicants. Overall, the scheme attracted more than 500 applications. Staff involved from both the Co-op Foundation and DCMS considered the exercise successful in terms of the volume, variety and quality of applications received.

Delivery

Most of the Explore and Enhance 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. While a small number experienced delays for various reasons and were further behind, overall there was a high degree of congruence between original plans and reported activity during the period from October 2019 to mid-March 2020.

The main divergences from the original project plans – for both Explore and Enhance – were associated with COVID and the redeployment of funding and wider resources to meet pressing community needs.

Although projects sometimes switched to activities that were not obviously or immediately connected to community spaces, the fact that they 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. Moreover, the pandemic response usefully challenged and extended understandings of what community spaces are and how they operate. It has shown that

virtual spaces are “real” spaces too – insofar as they facilitate (and sometimes constrain) meaningful interactions.

Learning and evaluation

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

While the learning and evaluation component of the programme was, therefore, less integrated and comprehensive than originally envisaged, over time, productive relationships were developed with many, though not all, of the funded projects and a range of potentially valuable outputs produced.

There are limitations to the evaluation that should be noted. At a project level, data provided via the monitoring forms provided a narrative account of local experiences rather than hard evidence of impacts. Also, the evaluation team was not wholly independent, as it was evaluating something that it was also partly responsible for delivering. However, the evaluation does provide a useful overview of how the programme operated, and evidence of whether its underlying theory of change appears valid.

Short-term outcomes

Many Explore projects described 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 that so many Explore projects (44 out of 46) were willing and able to move to the next stage of funding (Expand) also indicates progress from consultation to concrete action. Responses from the monitoring forms suggest that several Enhance projects were also 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.

Projects funded under both Explore and Enhance were also able to provide examples of new relationships and partnerships emerging from activity funded by Space to Connect. Some of this happened organically at a local level and some of it nationally, via the online workshops and other fora associated with the programme. The funded projects therefore not only drew individuals and groups into new relationships; they often also found their own connections widened and deepened.

Anecdotally, there was plenty of evidence of benefits for individual participants in terms of reduced isolation and greater social connectedness. There was less evidence – at the time of writing – of connections to or impacts on the wider sector and other funding bodies. That said, the move online prompted by the pandemic did facilitate some contact between small community organisations and national bodies. The ongoing knowledge exchange programme may provide opportunities to impact on other funders and national stakeholders.

Medium-term outcomes

There is less scope to evidence medium-term outcomes. However, organisations funded under both the Explore and Enhance strands successfully engaged with a range of local audiences. The resulting understanding of community needs and preferences had also begun to shape planned and actual activity.

The plausibility of most of the long-term outcomes – such as an 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. Ultimately, the scope to influence other funders and commissioners may determine the real legacy of the programme.

Reflections and conclusions

- 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 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.
- 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.
- That fluidity was also a feature in the funder’s relationship with the learning and evaluation team, which was also given scope to 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. However, it also made it more difficult to report directly back against the original logic model in terms of outcomes.
- 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.
- 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 did allow information and insights to flow in both directions and onwards to other audiences.

- There is value in bringing together a learning and evaluation team which contains diverse skills and experience – for example, practical knowledge of the sector, academic expertise, understanding of programme evaluation and awareness of how to connect the various parts of the system.
- While it has been possible to offer a narrative account of Space to Connect and preliminary assessment of the adequacy of its theory of change, a full impact evaluation of a programme of this kind would require a complex design and significantly greater resources.
- 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 long-term sustainability.

The full report of the evaluation of Space to Connect can be found here: [\[LBU to insert weblink\]](#)

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