



Stronger Communities Independent Evaluation (April 2018 – March 2019)

What is the evaluation about?

The Stronger Communities Programme (the Programme) was set up in 2015 to support communities to help themselves, and to create local solutions to local issues at a time of significant financial challenge for North Yorkshire County Council.

To deliver this ambition, the Programme has been designed with the aim of creating the conditions for effective social action in all communities in North Yorkshire. It will do this by enabling communities, and individuals in those communities, to make decisions about matters that affect them now and in the future, so that local people can improve their own wellbeing and ultimately contribute to a reduction in inequalities.

In order to understand how the Programme is performing against that ambition, what is working well, and how to stimulate greater impact, the Programme is currently part way through a five-year independent evaluation to 2022.

Key Evaluation Questions

1. By 2022, to what extent has the Programme contributed to a more sustainable voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector that is working to reduce inequalities?
2. To what extent has the Programme enabled the conditions for more effective social action?
3. To what extent has the Programme contributed to a change in the commissioning culture at North Yorkshire County Council towards more community-sector delivered services?
4. By 2022, to what extent has the Programme used evidence and learning about what works best to inform future decisions about the most impactful deployment of resources, in order to reduce inequalities and improve wellbeing?
5. To what extent has the Programme been an effective and efficient model to achieve its intended and expected ambitions?



Stronger communities aim

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Social action definition

Social action is about people coming together to help improve their lives and solve the problems that are important in their communities. It can broadly be defined as practical action in the service of others, which is:

- carried out by individuals or groups of people working together,
- not mandated and not for profit,
- done for the good of others – individuals, communities and/or society,
- bringing about social change and/or value.

Case Study 1 Achieve Together – The Orb and Pioneer Projects

How do you support two organisations, one in Harrogate looking to grow, and another in Craven that was facing challenging times?

With Stronger Communities' support, the solution was to enable a strategic director to work across both organisations, stabilising one and building further knowledge and networks for the other.

Orb Community Arts is a mental health and well-being focused community arts charity in Knaresborough supporting people from across the Harrogate district and North Yorkshire. Craven-based Pioneer Projects has a stated mission to improve the health and well-being of individuals and communities using creative arts and celebration.

"We didn't want to expand just for survival, but to add value. So how do we fund expansion? We didn't want to merge, as there is value of organisations that work in, understand, and can respond to local needs on the ground. The route we took was to call Pioneer Projects. They had a fantastic track record, and there was a real synergy. Our plan was to try to do one piece of work in two places."

"There has been a gain in reputation by stepping up. We are seen as a leader organisation that make things happen."

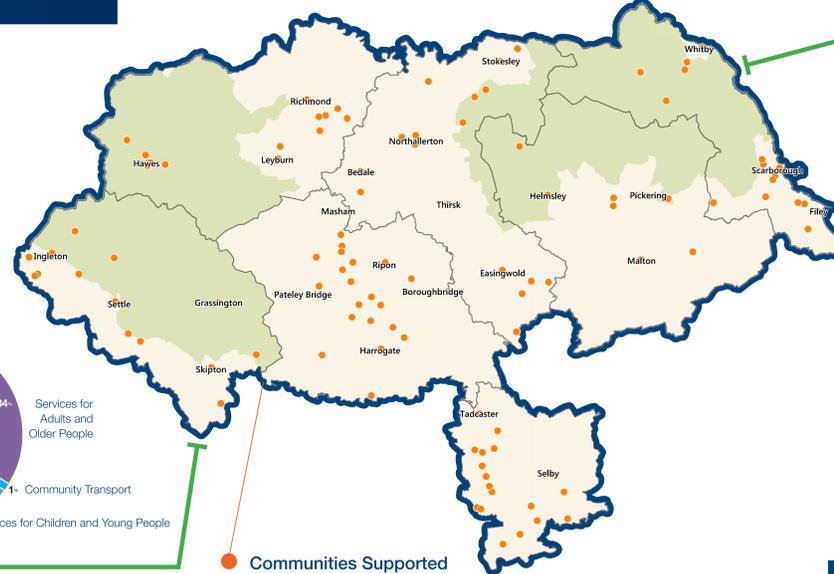
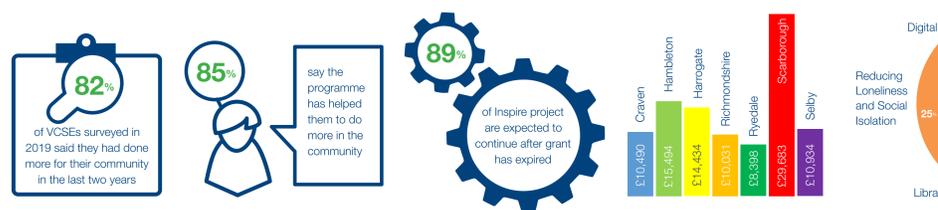
Leon Fijałkowski, Strategic Director, Orb Community Arts Knaresborough. Since the start of the relationship, the level of partnership working between

Orb and Pioneer Projects has moved from networking to full collaboration. The outcome is a wider set of services in both organisations, an approach that is consistently measured and of good quality. Prior to the Achieve bid, Pioneer Projects had received support through Stronger Communities to stabilise the organisation, and this £18k investment has leveraged over £100k.

Lynda Graveson from Pioneer Projects is clear what the consequences would have been without Stronger Communities' support:

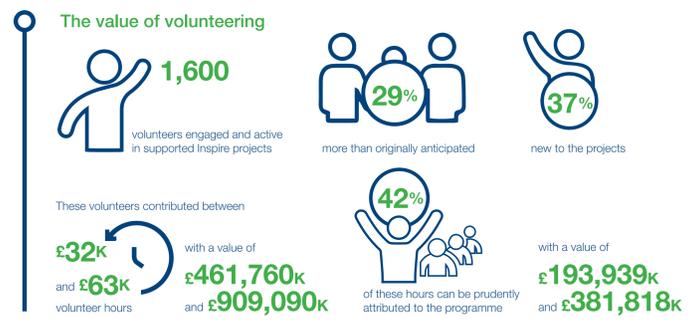
"Pioneer Projects would have struggled to survive. I don't think we would, and the organisation would have folded after 25 years. It would have been devastating for our service users, as so much provision has already been lost."

Communities supported by Stronger Communities



Investing in communities

A dedicated Delivery Manager for each district and a clear offer of support. With a network of contacts and depth of local knowledge, the Delivery Managers will engage and work with local groups interested in taking on a greater role in the delivery of services.



Case Study 2 Inspire Fund – Good Old Days with Revival North Yorkshire

Reminiscing is a fabulous way to encourage conversation, particularly for people with memory problems and those who are more isolated and find chatting to other people difficult. Remembering the 'good old days' can bring about a 'feel good factor', smiles, laughter and general good humour which has great health benefits.

Debbie Swales from Revival North Yorkshire delivers The Good Old Days, a reminiscing project focused at older people, at which themed items of vintage memorabilia are displayed and discussed. The project brought together people in isolated rural areas, some of whom are lonely due to poor mental and/or physical health. The sessions encouraged a stronger network of people with similar circumstances to bond, increase their self-esteem and build friendships.

The monthly Good Old Days reminiscing sessions are based on themes - child's play, music and films, the village shop, and weather and washing. The sessions engage older people through sharing memories of the 'good old days' facilitated by a Project Coordinator with vintage memorabilia. During a Good Old Days session people can handle the objects, stimulating memories and conversation.

A success factor was the care and attention to detail by Revival North Yorkshire that made the project successful and well attended. The Revival team took a personal approach to contacting people beforehand to check with them if they had transport issues and to make sure that they were confident about attending.

The project also strengthened organisational partnerships between Revival, Beyond Housing, the Surgery, Stronger Communities, Alzheimer Society and others and inspired plans for future collaborative activities.

"This gave us the opportunity to research and apply for funding to help us continue."

- Strengthening communities**
The Programme is providing relevant and valued support to VCSE organisations in North Yorkshire that are aware of and engage with it. In turn, the Programme is enabling these VCSEs to deliver localised social action contributing to positive outcomes in their communities. Reach is understandably limited given the availability of only one Delivery Manager per district, but for those organisations and communities that are supported directly by the team, the outcomes are likely to be deep and longer-lasting.
- Creating the conditions for purposeful social action**
There is emerging evidence that the Programme is successfully creating the conditions for social action in at least 110 locations in North Yorkshire through its various grant programmes, an emphasis on place and collaboration, and organisational development and capacity building activity. The Programme has helped organisations develop or refocus their mission or purpose in a community context; provided practical resources; and have helped nurture deeper relationships between different organisations to deliver social action.
- Investment strategy**
This strand of the Programme is where the greatest amount of evolution is taking place, including the way in which specialist consultancy and Delivery Manager time works in unison in different contexts to suit the specific needs of projects. The efficacy of the Inspire Fund is strong, while for Achieve Together it is too early to assess its effectiveness. The Programme now has a large portfolio of projects, over time this will enable the investment strategy to evolve and focus on those models that seem to work best in different contexts.
- Developing the model**
The Programme has an innate learning culture, is outward looking and is continually seeking ways to improve what it does. It draws inspiration from outside North Yorkshire and there is evidence that it is inspiring other local authorities in England. It learns from what works in equal measure from what does not work so well. The Programme deploys an effective team given its size and remit, delivering valued support to the VCSE sector and communities they serve. To be even more effective the Programme needs to set out a very clear, long-term strategic agenda.
- Changing culture**
There is emerging evidence that those commissioners within the Council who engage with the Programme in practical ways, report that it changes their way of thinking and challenges what they think they know about social action commissioning. Promising progress is observed with Health and Adult Services and Public Health who increasingly trust the Programme to manage budgets to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Culture change is gradual and will take time. The Programme can play a part in bringing about modest, incremental change to the Council's culture by focusing on projects that showcase ways in which communities and the VCSE sector have the capacity and capability to deliver services that matter to them.

Moving forward

- The evaluators make five key recommendations:
1. Work with senior leadership to agree medium and long term strategies to 2022, 2025 and 2030, and the priorities for each period.
 2. To support that strategy development, develop a shared understanding of 'community wellbeing' and the three conditions of 'people, place and power' that underpin it.
 3. Create the conditions where the team has sufficient time, space and remit to innovate, learn and proactively communicate what works and what does not work, so that it can influence and inspire other services within the Council to build the Programme's way of working into their business-as-usual approach.
 4. Agree how best to work collectively with elected Members and their locality budgets to create impact at scale for the benefit of communities.
 5. To work with others to decide where and why it should deploy its resources to support the growing 'place' agenda and replicating models of good practice to different localities in the County.



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"The Delivery Managers are trusted, honest brokers that are highly regarded by those VCSEs and communities in which they deploy their time and expertise."

"The independent evaluators conclude that the Programme comprises an effective, motivated team given its size and remit, delivering valued support to the VCSE sector and communities they serve."