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Empowering Places

The programme model and emerging impact

A report prepared for Power to Change

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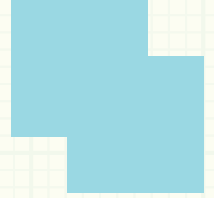
01. Executive summary

The Empowering Places programme funds locally rooted ‘catalyst’ organisations in six places, over five years to empower communities to develop community businesses. Through the development of new community businesses, the programme aims to provide benefits and opportunities to local people and create more resilient places.

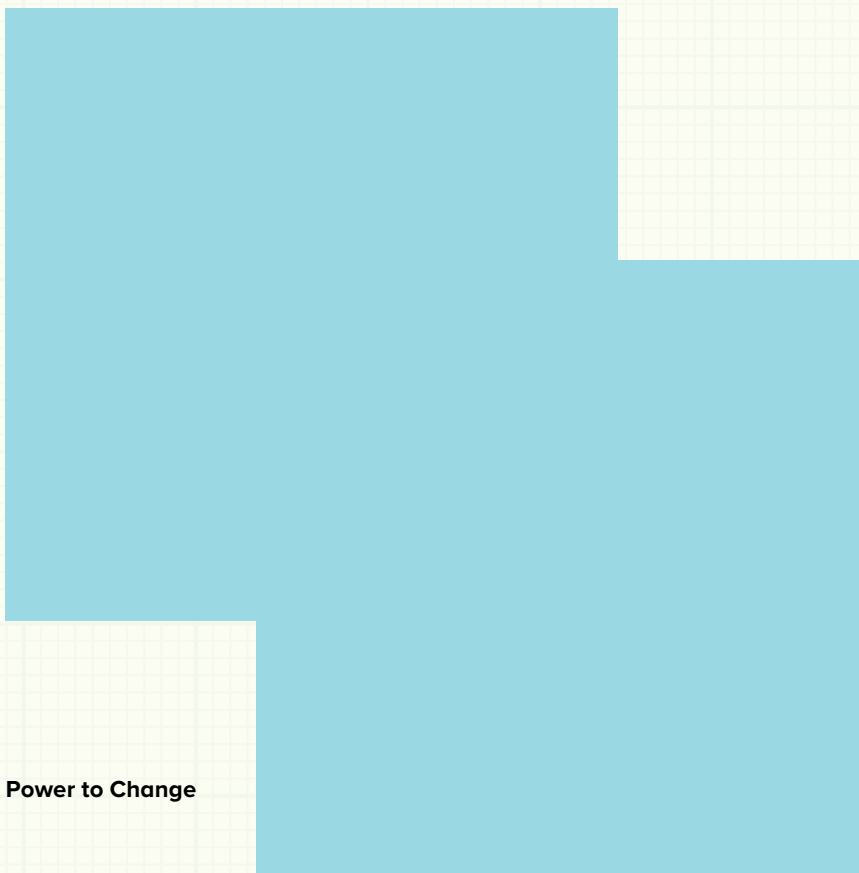
The programme, delivered by Co-operatives UK, resources catalysts with grant funding, money to award seed grants, access to an expert ‘tech lead’ from Centre for Local Economic Strategies or The New Economics Foundation, and access to specialist tailored support from an approved pool of providers.

Over nearly two years, the evaluation has collected data to understand the approaches of catalysts, within the context they operate, as well as the emerging impact of the Empowering Places programme. Key findings from this report identify that:

- **Each catalyst is operating within a unique context, and responding to unique challenges using assets locally available to them. Their delivery is affected by local infrastructure, the history of the place and the investment in the place from others; as well as their own organisational approach.**
- **Central to the programme’s offer is the combination of both funding and capacity support; neither would work well without the other. In every area, the largest proportion of capacity support funding has been allocated to staff and organisational costs, which has allowed catalysts to dedicate time and space to manage the programme effectively, work strategically, upskill themselves, expand their capacity to do more in their local area, and ‘catalyse’ more effectively.**
- **Catalysts have requested and allocated more money than they have used. This appears to be because investing in themselves and upskilling staff, feels at odds with providing direct support to the community, therefore, mandating an attitudinal shift which has meant a slower approach.**
- **The strength of relationships between different partners has been key to how resources have been requested and used. This applies to the use of the tech lead role which appears to be most frequent in areas where the relationship has been sustained for longer, as well as the catalysts’ confidence in each other’s recommendations from the provider pool.**



- **The catalyst organisations are delivering the programme using three distinct but complementary approaches: 1) engaging and empowering their community, 2) supporting community businesses to grow and develop and 3) improving conditions in their wider place by enhancing networks and bringing in resources. The first two approaches have been hindered greatly by Covid-19. However, the pandemic has actually enabled the catalysts to deliver the third approach more effectively.**
- **In terms of impact, Empowering Places appears to be supporting catalysts and community businesses to develop confidence, skills and capacity which are translating into the successful development of community businesses. Partnerships and networks are also being strengthened for the catalyst organisations and the community businesses that they support which bodes well for their ongoing role in their places. There is also some emerging evidence that the programme is beginning to have an impact on the local areas through the provision of new services and an increased focus on local communities.**



02. Introduction

Empowering Places aims to build more resilient communities by catalysing and nurturing community businesses to provide benefits and opportunities for local people. The programme funds locally rooted ‘catalyst’ organisations in six places to help empower communities to develop community businesses:

- [Abram Ward Community Cooperative \(AWCC\) in Abram, Wigan](#)
- [B-Inspired in Braunstone, Leicester](#)
- [Centre4 in Nunsthorpe and Bradley Park, Grimsby](#)
- [Real Ideas in Devonport and Stonehouse, Plymouth](#)
- [The Wharton Trust in Dyke House, Hartlepool](#)
- [Made in Manningham, incubated by Participate Projects in Manningham, Bradford](#)

Between July 2017 and September 2020, the Made in Manningham team was incubated by Action for Business Ltd, which operates out of the Carlisle Business Centre in Manningham. Since November 2020, Made in Manningham has transferred to a new host organisation, Participate Projects, where it operates independently as a catalyst for community businesses in Manningham. As a result, there are references to Action for Business, Participate Projects and to Made in Manningham as a nascent organisation in this report.

The Empowering Places programme is delivered by a consortium of organisations including [Power to Change](#), [Co-operatives UK](#) the lead delivery partner, and with support from expert ‘tech leads’ at the [Centre for Local Economic Strategies \(CLES\)](#) and The [New Economics Foundation \(NEF\)](#). The catalysts also have access to a capacity support provider pool, grant funding and money to award seed grants to emerging community businesses in their areas to deliver a five-year plan. Each catalyst receives up to £1m (between July 2017 and July 2022). This report summarises the interim findings from an independent evaluation of the Empowering Places programme, delivered by a consortium led by Renaisi.

The aim of this evaluation is to enable Power to Change and its stakeholders to learn about how to work in places, and how community businesses can drive local change. This paper is part of a series of outputs aiming to take a developmental, learning based approach to understanding and improving the programme, and to support with wider learning for similar programmes in the future.

The first in this series of outputs was an interim report of evaluation findings published in August 2020. The second is a set of profiles of each place, looking at the context and approaches to delivery in each area. This third paper builds on the first interim report, drawing on findings from the profiles, highlighting similarities and differences between the places and approaches, as well as drawing out learning gathered throughout the first three and a half years of delivery. The next output will be a paper that explores key enablers and barriers to delivering the Empowering Places programme.

03. Methodology

The evaluation is a mixed methods study drawing on analysis of publicly available datasets as well as qualitative data, including interviews with staff at Power to Change, delivery partners, catalyst staff and community businesses. It also draws on information provided in programme documents authored by the catalyst organisations, delivery partners and Power to Change¹. Researchers have taken detailed notes and used an observation and learning log to track relevant findings and develop a comprehensive understanding of the development and impact of the programme.

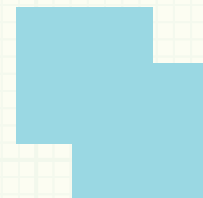
Limitations to demonstrating impact

Impact is always challenging to measure in place-based programmes but the specific characteristics and approach of the Empowering Places programme make that challenge even harder for three key reasons. First, 'impact' in the context of the programme was deliberately loosely defined and Empowering Places was designed to be something of an experiment, to explore what happens when catalyst organisations are supported to promote community business in deprived communities in England. This means that while the programme started with some specific aims, it has been delivered in a flexible and iterative way that allows the places themselves to articulate what impact looks like as the programme progresses.

Second, the absence of comprehensive baseline data or any way of establishing a counterfactual makes measuring the direct impacts of the programme objectively challenging. This is not a critique of the programme, but rather a reflection of the nature of the approach and the change that it aims to catalyse. Power to Change has commissioned a hyperlocal version of the Community Life Survey at the beginning of the programme and every two years subsequently, which provides interesting insights into the possible contribution of catalyst organisations to changes in their local area over time, but does not capture the full range of impacts created by the programme itself. These results will be published in June/July 2021 and will be included in the evaluation at a later date.

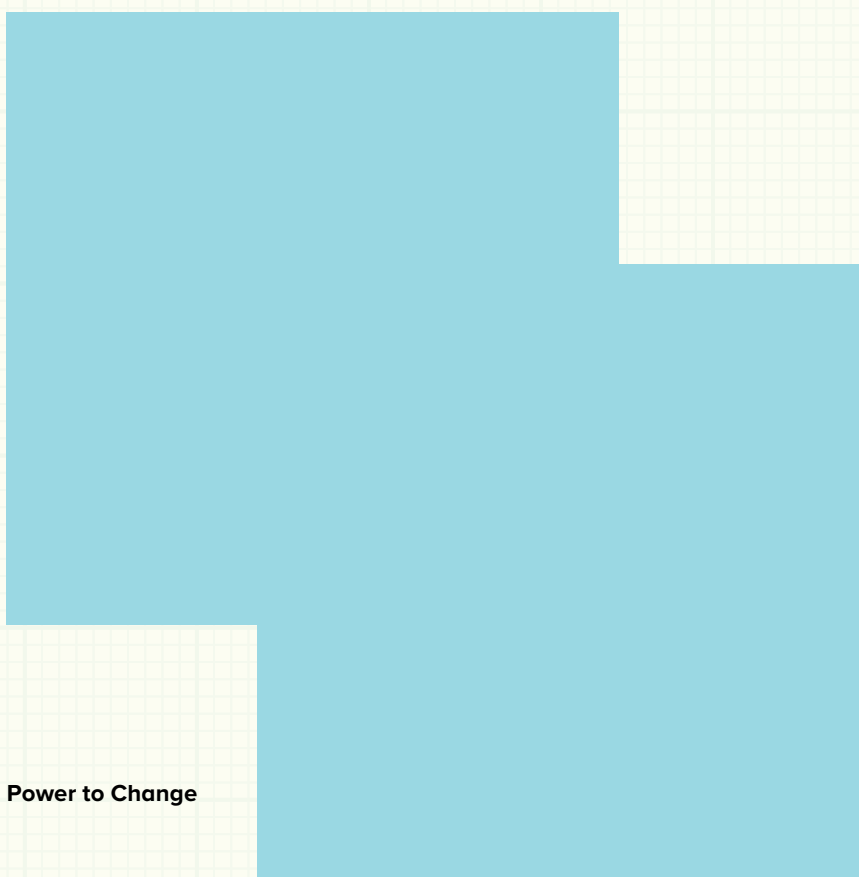
Finally, the capacity building nature of the programme means that the majority of any impact experienced by the local communities is likely be evident beyond the term of the programme rather than during it.

¹ These include: Power to Change's Learning Paper on Empowering Places, Power to Change's internal quarterly reports, Co-operatives UK reports to Power to Change, notes from community business health checks and diagnostic sessions.



This evaluation therefore aims to take a realist approach to understanding impact, focusing on how the catalysts and community businesses who interact with the programme perceive and experience the impacts so far. The evaluation team had hoped to explore impact not only from the perspective of the catalysts and community businesses, but from the perspective of the local communities that they are working for and with. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has meant it has not been possible for researchers to visit communities and gather data from those not directly involved in delivering the programme.

For these reasons, this paper looks at the impacts that are emerging so far as defined by the catalyst organisations, community businesses and programme staff. It identifies impacts that have occurred at three levels: for the catalyst organisations and their staff, for the individual community businesses, and at a community level, before exploring current views on the likely sustainability of these impacts.

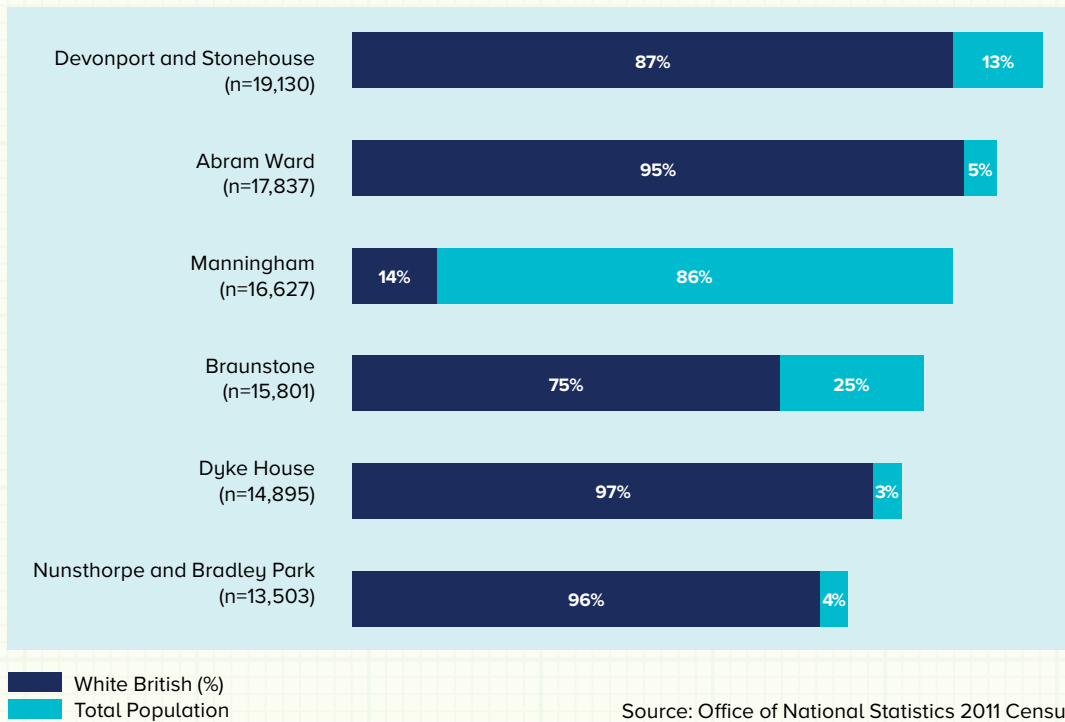


04. Context of each place

The Empowering Places catalysts operate in urban settings in areas of high deprivation, that lack access to some local amenities such as high streets, pubs, supermarkets and spaces for new businesses. All of the hyperlocal areas where the programme is delivered have a population under 20,000 people and were identified as having some opportunities for community business growth.

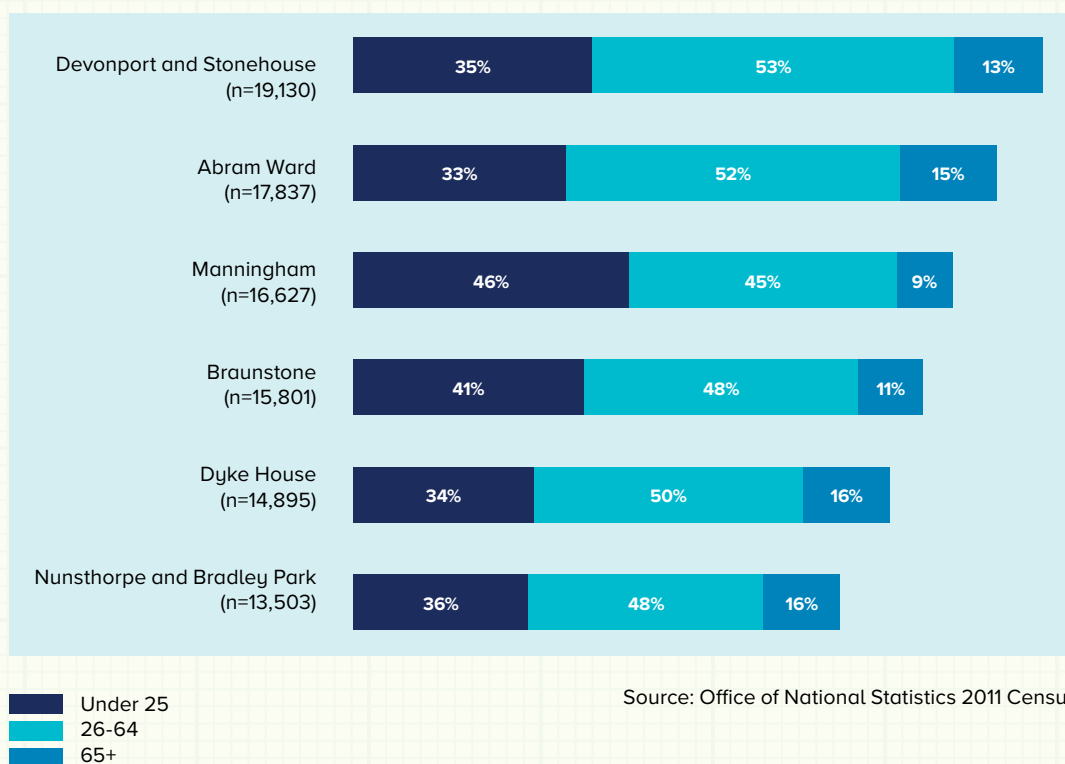
Devonport and Stonehouse, Nunsthorpe and Bradley Park, Dyke House and Abram Ward have experienced local economic challenges due to the loss of naval, fishing and coal industries respectively. The graph below illustrates that these areas have a higher than average proportion of the population identifying as white British (79.8%) compared to England as a whole². By contrast, both Manningham and Braunstone have more diverse populations due to higher levels of immigration into the area over time. This is particularly true of Manningham where only 13.8% of people identify as white British. On average, these two areas also have a younger population than the other four. Some catalyst staff in the other four places have suggested that an older population in their area may be caused by a lack of opportunities for younger people, forcing some to leave.

Figure 1: Total population per hyper-local area



² [Local Insights](#) (2019)

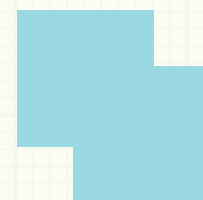
Figure 2: Population age per hyper-local area



Each area has its own unique assets and faces its own unique challenges. All areas except Abram Ward score in the lowest percentile on the Thriving Places index for work and local economy³. According to OCSI statistics, mental and physical health is a bigger issue in Hartlepool than in the other areas; whilst in Braunstone, Manningham and Nunsthorpe and Bradley Park, indicators around education and learning such as number of adults with qualifications, educational attainment of children, and school readiness are low⁴. Others face challenges with access to local amenities; for example Abram Ward and Nunsthorpe and Bradley Park, located at the edge of Wigan and Grimsby respectively, rely on public transport to access shops, restaurants and pubs, sports and leisure centres, and even schools in the case of Abram Ward.

³ [Thriving Places Index](#) (2020)

⁴ [Thriving Places Index](#) (2020)



The programme team in each area has to be responsive to local assets and challenges: what might work in one area is not necessarily going to work in another. In Plymouth for example, prior investment and similar initiatives in the city have meant that the Empowering Places programme has a stronger foundation on which to build. As a Social Enterprise City, Plymouth already had a large number of community-based organisations and a local council that was supportive of the idea of social enterprise and community business. The city-wide focus on social enterprise has also encouraged investment from a range of other organisations. This includes The Rank Foundation which runs the RISE Trade Up programme in Plymouth, combining match trading grants with a learning programme to assist the advancement of social enterprise in the city. The high levels of activity within Plymouth have led to the catalyst organisation, Real Ideas, linking Empowering Places activity with other strands of work that it is delivering in the city, including the Enrich programme which aims to explore opportunities for greater social enterprise and community business activity in local green spaces. Real ideas is also exploring opportunities for the wide range of community organisations and social enterprises across the city to form a local network. Some other places in the programme have not benefitted from prior investment to the same extent, which has meant that catalysts have needed to invest more time in the 'groundwork' required for a programme like Empowering Places to succeed.

Figure 3 below shows the top five funders in each of the places on the programme at a town or city level. It shows that substantially higher investment has been made in Leicester and Bradford, and to a lesser extent Plymouth, and demonstrates that the wider funding landscape that Empowering Places is operating within varies substantially across the six areas. In Grimsby, Power to Change is one of the top five funders in the area and therefore the Empowering Places investment has a greater overall significance in the wider funding context. In other places, Empowering Places is one stream of funding amongst several other significant funders. One implication of this is that catalysts in better-funded places (Leicester, Plymouth and Bradford) may have more opportunities than the other three areas to leverage additional funding in the area to support the longer-term sustainability of the programme's activities. Figure 4 shows that differences in investment in the wider town or city cannot be entirely explained by differing population size.

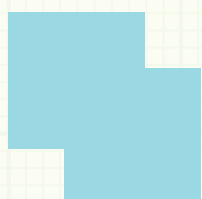
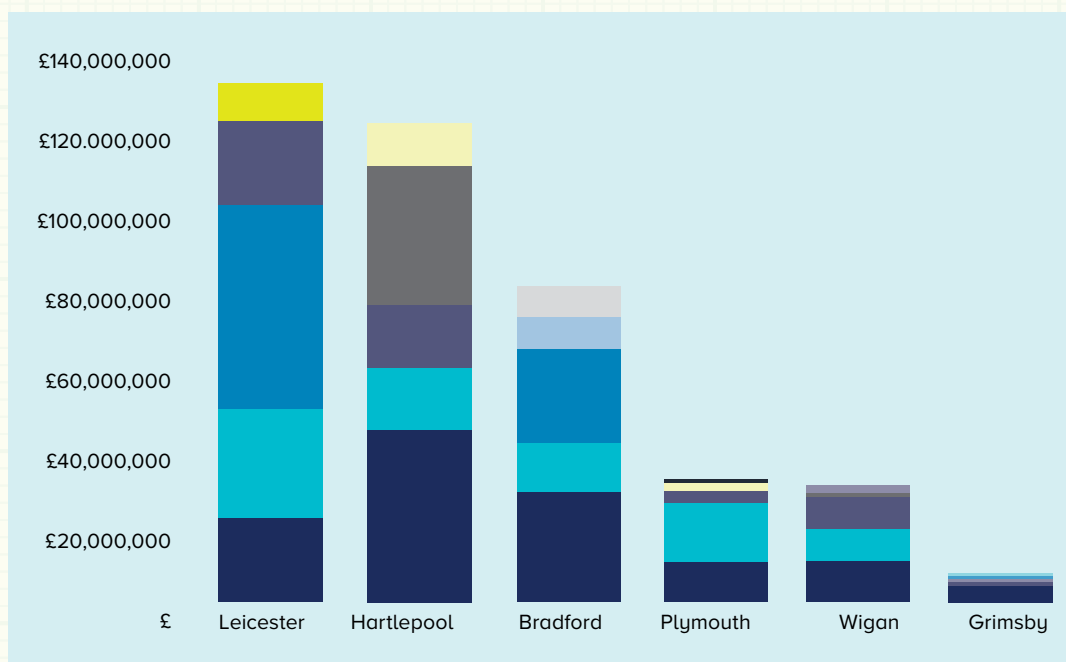


Figure 3: Top five funders per place between 2017-20



Source: 360Giving GrantNav

- The Henry Smith Charity
- Power to Change
- Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport
- Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
- The National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Department of Transport
- The Home Office
- Sport England
- The Wellcome Trust
- The National Lottery Community Fund
- Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy
- Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government
- Department for Education

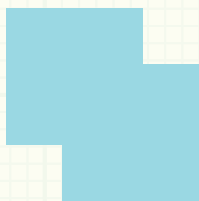
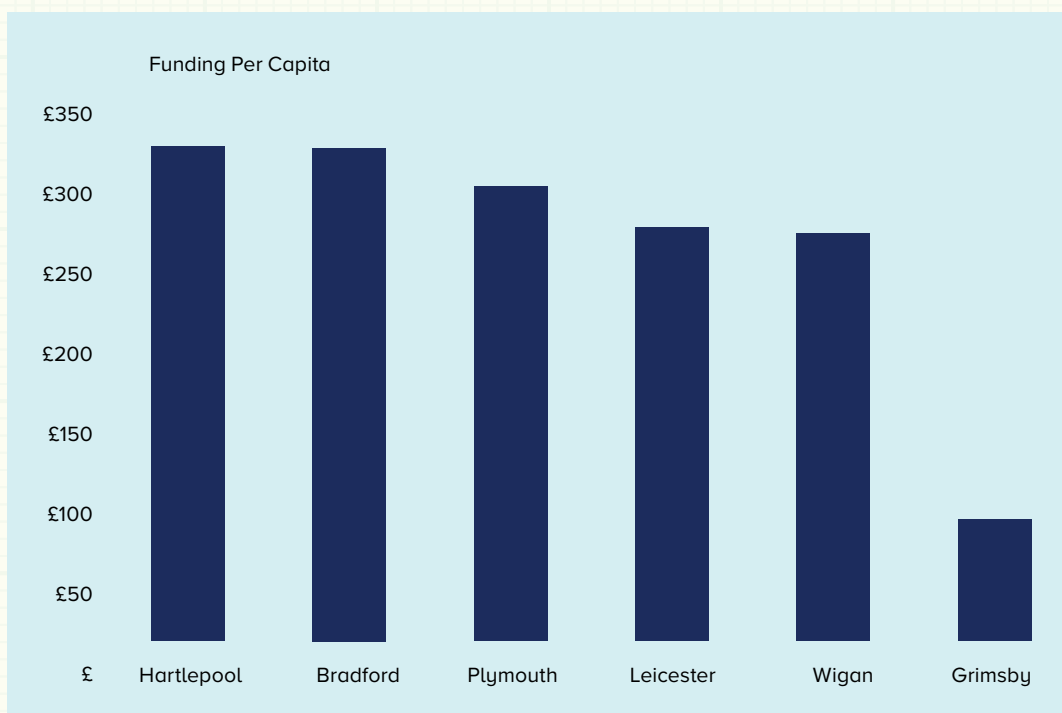
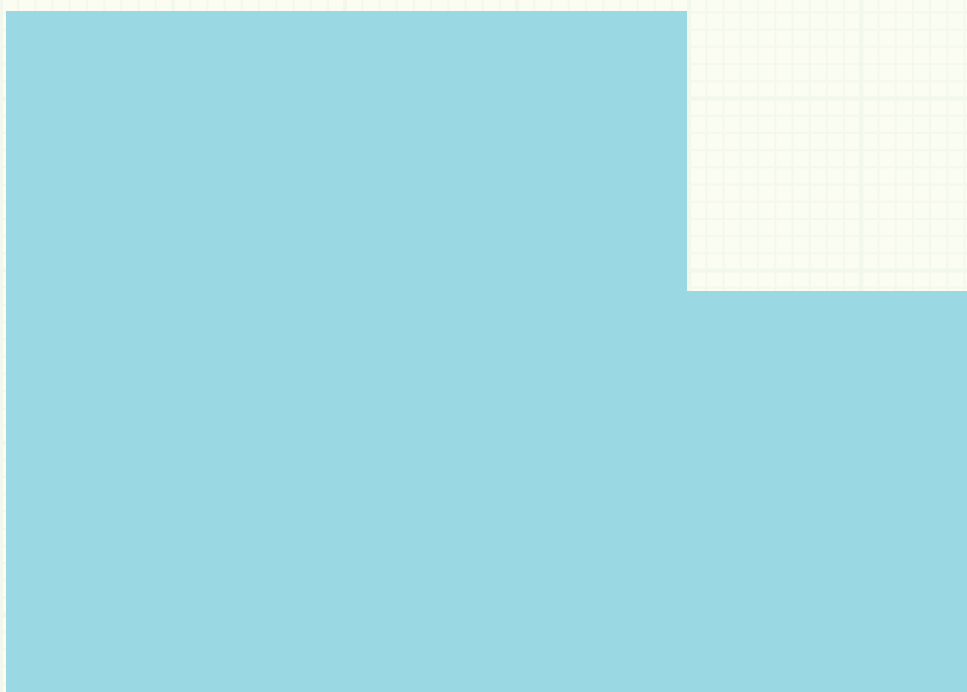


Figure 4: Funding per capita provided by the top 5 funders in each area, across all six Empowering Places locations



Source: 360 Giving GrantsNav and Office for National Statistics 2019 Population Estimates



05. Empowering Places delivery

Catalyst organisations

The Empowering Places catalysts are locally rooted ‘anchor’ organisations chosen to be part of the programme because of their strong connections to the local community and capacity to support others to develop community businesses. However, each organisation has a varied history, size and context which affects how they deliver and manage the Empowering Places programme locally. For example, Real Ideas, Made in Manningham and Abram Ward Community Cooperative are organisations with experience and specialisms in social enterprise and business coaching, and have therefore used approaches like enterprise development to catalyse and support new businesses. Other catalysts such as Centre4 and the Wharton Trust have focused on approaches like community organising to build self-motivation and confidence, creating the conditions for new business leaders; and B-Inspired has used an asset-based incubation approach.

Figure 4 shows how the size and scale of each organisation differs in terms of their revenue income, asset base, and number of staff and volunteers. This highlights that Real Ideas, B-Inspired and Centre4 have substantially higher annual incomes as well as a larger asset base than the other three catalysts.

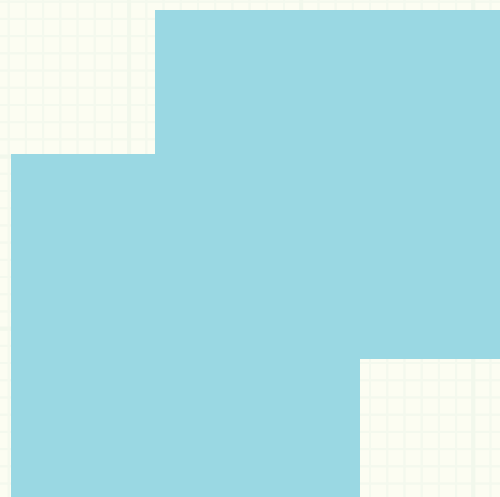
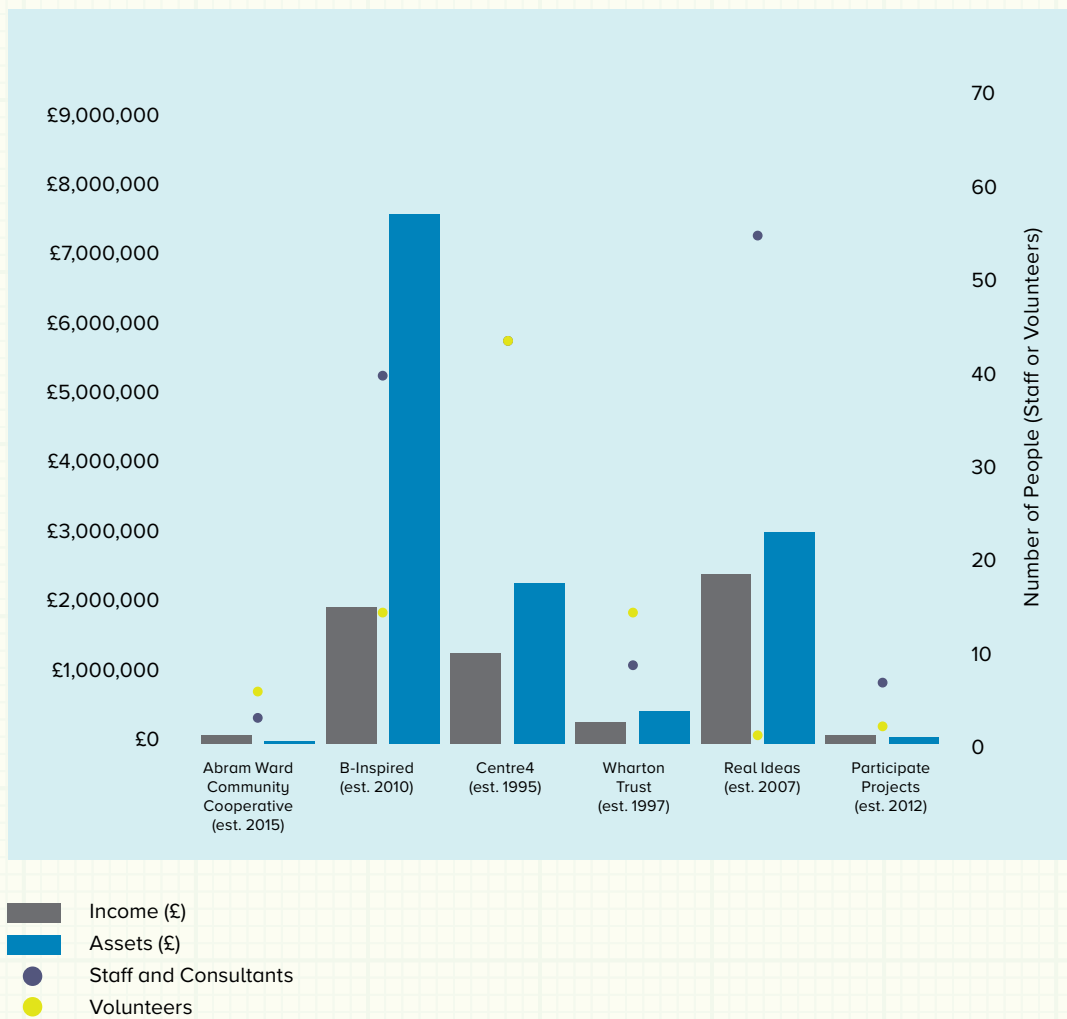


Figure 5: Self-reported Catalyst Income, Assets and Personnel as of October 2020



Our interim evaluation report published in August 2020 highlighted that Empowering Places is strategically managed at different levels depending on the size of the organisation, with the smaller organisations tending to manage it at a CEO level and the larger organisations using a dedicated Project Manager. This affects the extent to which catalysts view the programme as a core part of their overall strategy, or a distinct stream of work.

Resourcing the Empowering Places programme

The programme provides catalysts with:

- A £650,000 grant over five years, to cover their costs of participation in the programme⁵.**
- The ability to award seed funding to community businesses being supported by the catalyst.**
- 15 days per year of expert ‘tech lead’ support from New Economics Foundation (NEF) or Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) to guide, advise and support catalysts and community business’ organisational development.**
- A budget of £125,000 to fund capacity building support, access additional tech lead time, and/or specialist tailored support from an approved pool of providers, for example business model planning, marketing etc.**
- Access to peer learning opportunities e.g. bi-annual ‘learning camps’ (pre-Covid-19) attended by all catalysts and delivery partners; study visits; an online forum; and cross-place training opportunities such as enterprise coaching.**
- There is also a local collaboration budget which is retained by Power to Change for wrap around work in each place.**

This package of capacity support is used to strengthen the catalyst organisations’ influence and reach locally, to improve sustainability and invest in strategic development, and to help them support community businesses in their locality⁶. The flexibility of this funding and capacity building support allows each organisation to respond to the unique needs and opportunities in its local area and complement and grow existing activities.

⁵ Real Ideas in Plymouth received £750,000 due to being a pilot for the programme

⁶ The annual budget allocated has changed over time. This information is taken from Power to Change’s internal Empowering Places Update report Feb 2020

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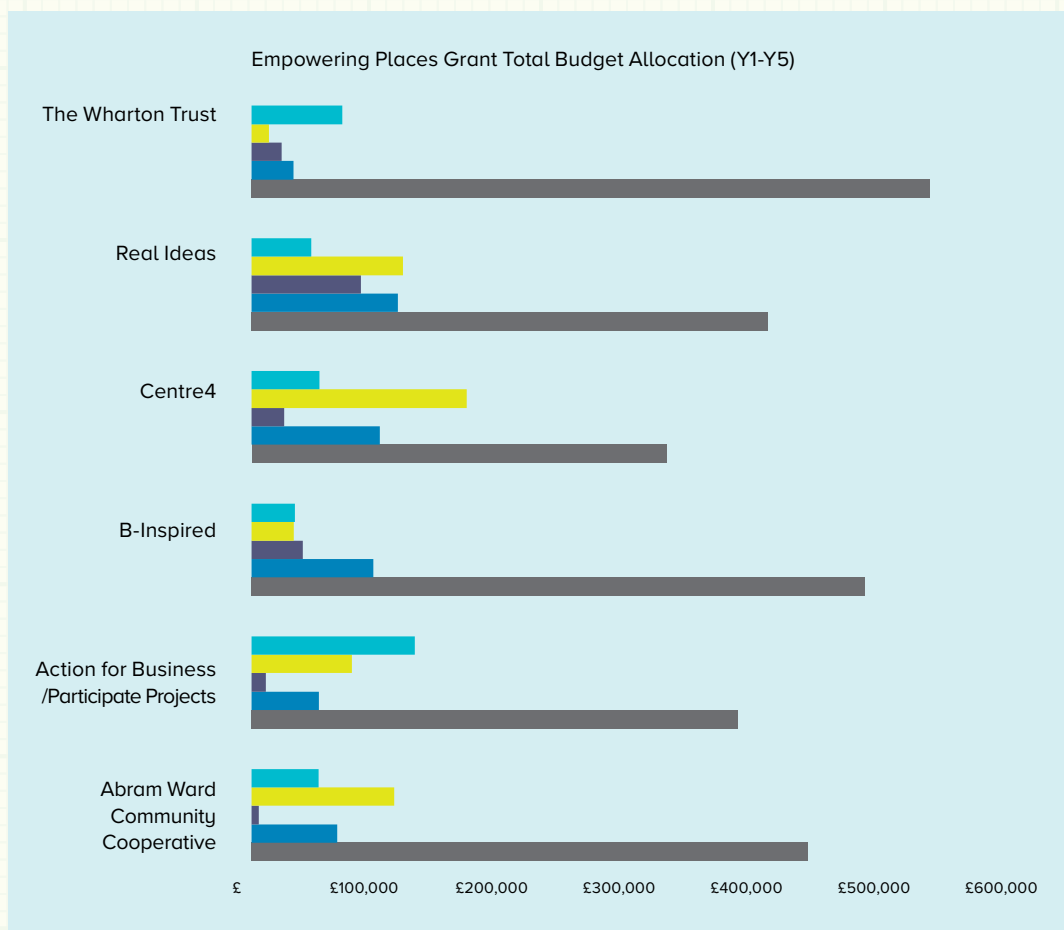
Power to Change brings the money and to some extent the intent, but the catalysts set the agenda, individually in their places, but also as a collective – Programme Staff, PS1

Funding draw down

Due to the flexibility afforded by Power to Change, and the alignment of approach to their different contexts, the catalysts have used the funding in different ways to support their local aims. The figure below provides a breakdown of the financial support claimed by the catalysts between years one and two of the Empowering Places programme, as well as the requested amount for the remaining three years of the programme⁷. Internal costs include office rental, equipment, travel, subsistence, marketing, communications and events costs.

⁷ Power to Change Grant Overview Snapshot (As of Jan 2021)

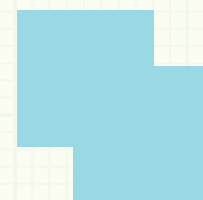
Figure 6: Total Budget Allocation of Empowering Places Grant per Catalyst Organisation.



These figures use Year 1-2 actual spend and Year 3-4 budget awarded.

- Seed Grant
- Community Business Incubation
- Outreach
- Internal
- Staff and Consultants

Figure 6 shows that staff costs make up the largest percentage of the grant in all areas. This, alongside funding for internal costs, has allowed catalysts to dedicate time and space to manage the programme effectively. Other costs for community business incubation and seed funding have focused on growing community businesses.



Staff and internal costs

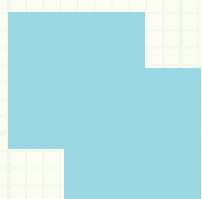
A unique element of the programme is that it covers core costs and salary costs for everyday work, as well as providing additional funding for Empowering Places staff to get involved in strategic networking and learning opportunities, allowing the catalysts time and space to do this well and expand their capacity to do more in their local area. Catalysts have the flexibility to distribute funding for staff costs as they see appropriate, therefore the programme contributes towards the salaries of various staff members, recognising that different people will bring different skills and add value to the delivery of the programme.

Staff and internal costs combined represent between 58% (Centre4/Real Ideas) and 74% (B-Inspired) of the programme funds being spent within the organisation itself. This means the proportion of spend on outreach, incubation and seed grant support for community businesses varies between 18% (B-Inspired) and 36% (Centre4) of the total budget. This variation reflects the different ways that catalysts are implementing the programme, with some investing more in internal capacity and resource to incubate community businesses in-house, and others investing more in outreach and incubation, and/or allocating money directly to community businesses.

Seed grants and community business incubation

Seed grants and community business incubation are an important element of the 'catalysing' process. Seed grants act as 'enablers' for getting ideas off the ground, which is particularly valuable in communities where individuals do not have a lot of wealth and a small amount of money can make a big difference. In Abram Ward, for example, the catalyst has recently increased the number of community businesses it is supporting from seven to eleven by distributing seed funding to four new community businesses through participatory budgeting events. The seed grant allocation has also meant that catalysts do not have to go through a lengthy application process to give money to their community businesses, which has been empowering for both catalysts and community businesses themselves.

The seed grants have been really important. They fit really well with our enterprise coaching approach. They help to draw people in, we can have a conversation with them, work out if they are a community or private business – Catalyst Staff, CA9



Whilst originally limited to £5,000 (with up to £1,000 being able to be held on behalf of unincorporated groups), as the programme progresses there are plans to allocate larger seed grants (c £10-£15k) to resource to start-up costs of some community businesses. Centre4 also relinquished a proportion of their own grant (£48k) to the Ethical Recruitment Agency, a new community business initiative that they helped to establish which needed more substantial set-up funds.

Outreach

Outreach costs include stakeholder and community engagement, delivery partners, training, mentoring, and community research. This cost line is largest in Plymouth, and partly accounted for by two delivery partners that Real Ideas has subcontracted to help it deliver the programme locally (Nudge Community Builders, which is itself a community business, and Iridescent Ideas).

Challenges

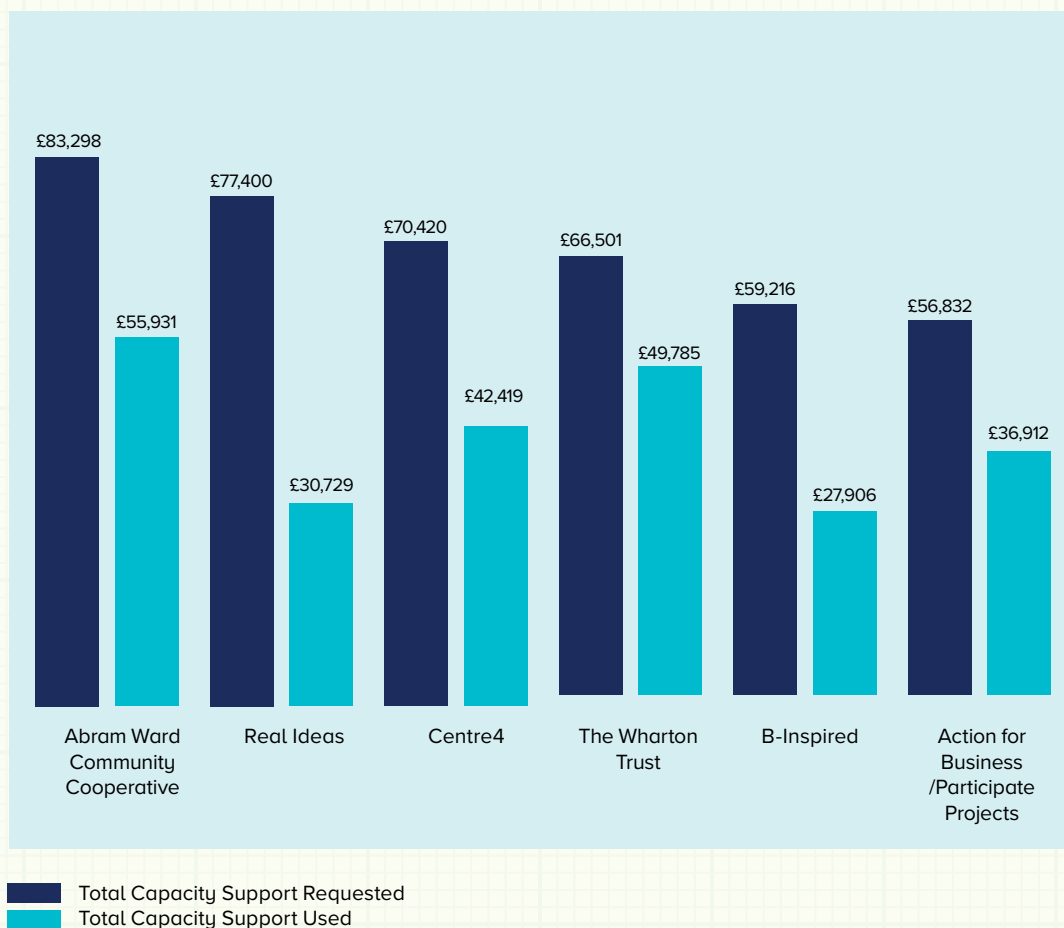
The reality of setting up a business is costly, and often requires a more significant investment than a £5,000 seed grant; and although the overall Empowering Places grant is generous and flexible, there are some concerns that it does not provide enough in terms of investment and start-up funds, particularly in these more deprived areas. There are a few examples of community businesses having to borrow money from relatives and friends, or the catalyst, or having reported being behind on loan re-payments. There is perhaps scope for expertise in accessing business grants and loans to be explored in more detail by the programme.

I think we've got some really talented community business leaders, who really know their stuff in terms of generating ideas and running those ideas, but they're not being supported well enough, I don't think, in terms of resources for this to work. It's not financially feasible at the moment – Tech Lead, TL2

Capacity support draw down

The capacity support offer incorporates tech lead time, access to the support provider pool and the central learning opportunities provided through the programme. The figure below provides a breakdown of the capacity support requested in each place compared with the amount spent, highlighting significant disparities between each in all areas.

Figure 7: Capacity Support Requested and Capacity Support Used (as of January 2021)



Catalysts and programme staff attribute the underspent resource to a ‘careful attitude to spending’, sustained through years working in a sector with little funding and where the funding that is available has predominantly been for project costs. An approach that invests in building organisational capacity and upskilling staff, at the expense of providing direct support, has required an attitudinal shift, and has meant a slower approach.

When you operate in the kind of environment we operate in, it becomes difficult to spend money – it becomes overwhelming. That environment of not having much – you want to make sure you get good value and it does have an impact. I'm reticent to spend unless I can work out it's going to have an impact – Catalyst Staff, CA8

This preference to spend on capacity building in a careful and considered way partly explains the disparity between 'requested' and 'spent' funds, along with a lack of staff capacity to engage in planning and managing the strategic work – both in general, but in particular during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As well as frugality and resource it has also taken time for community businesses' needs to become clear. Catalysts' response to a question in Power to Change's annual grantee survey showed their biggest challenges was "everything takes longer than expected"⁸.

⁸ Power to Change Catalyst Impact Survey (2019)

Summary of key learning about resourcing:

- Whilst the purpose of the programme has been to catalyse community businesses, significant amounts of funding are needed to help catalysts build and sustain solid foundations for this work and the strategic headspace to achieve longer-term goals.
- The programme’s relatively high spend on staff and internal costs, compared to incubation or seed grants, has been invested in catalyst staff using their time and expertise to support the community businesses and individuals within the community who want to develop business ideas. This however may not leave a long-term legacy of support if the organisations do not have the resource to retain all of the staff who have built their experience and relationships after the end of the programme.
- The programme gives the catalysts control and power by providing resources which can be leveraged to strengthen local networks, and flexibility to make decisions in a way that responds to local context, putting catalysts in a strong position locally.

I think it has allowed them to go into some rooms and know that they're well-resourced financially but also well-equipped in terms of knowledge and to know that they are experts in that space – Programme Staff, PS3

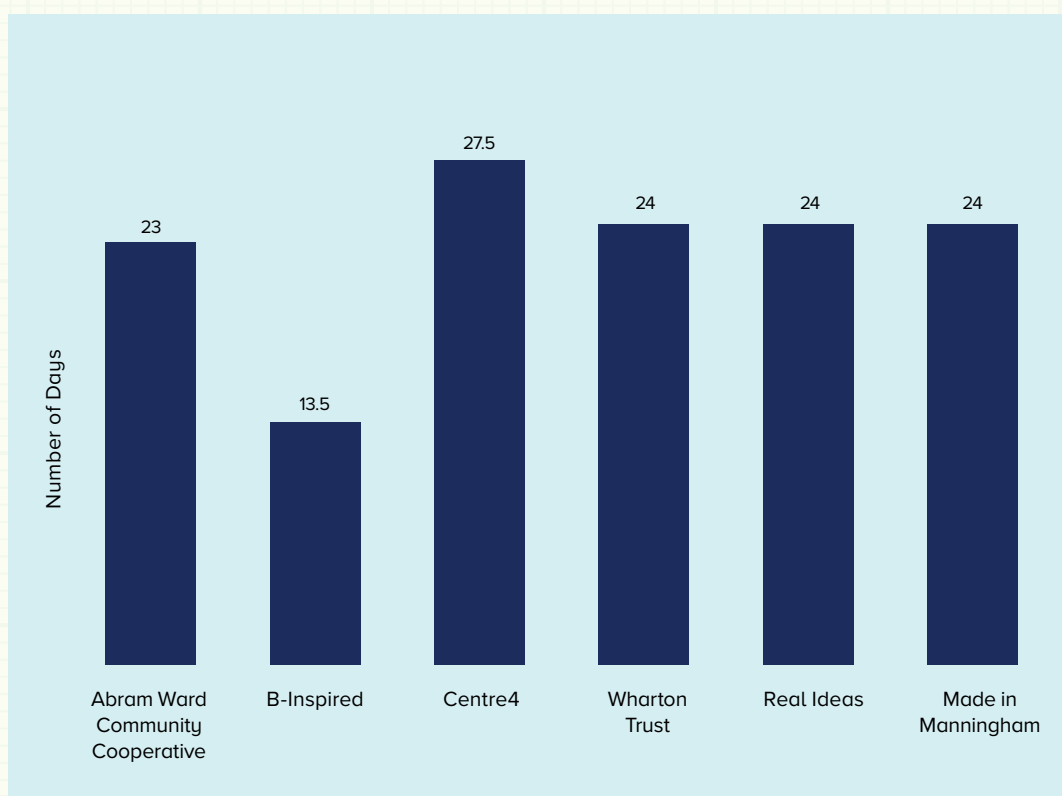
Central capacity support

Empowering Places provides various forms of wrap-around support including individual tailored tech lead support; networking and learning opportunities through programme ‘learning camps’ and facilitated activities such as study visits and webinars; and an innovation strand which provides programme-wide opportunities for training, building capacity and influencing at a local and national level.

Tech leads

The tech lead role has developed and strengthened with the programme, predominately taking the shape of critical friend and coach. In some places, this role has supported catalysts to define strategic priorities (e.g. Grimsby and Wigan); in others, it has focused on harnessing opportunities such as additional funding or those provided through the capacity provider pool (Leicester, Plymouth); or has ‘opened doors’ and supported with developing outward relationships (Hartlepool, Bradford).

Figure 8: Total Number of Tech Lead Support Days used in 2020



Relationships between tech leads and catalysts appear to be stronger in areas where they have been sustained for longer, such as in Hartlepool, Bradford and Plymouth, as time has enabled trust to be built on both sides. This has been enhanced by the tech lead growing a more comprehensive understanding about the place and local power dynamics, which has allowed them to play the role of critical friend and advisor more effectively. In some instances, the role of the tech lead as a neutral outsider has been useful to help navigate local dynamics effectively. Some catalysts also reported that the role has been most useful when the tech lead is already familiar with the area.

The tech lead role has been less effective when the relationship between the tech lead and the lead at the catalyst has not been as strong; this has happened when the tech lead for an area has changed multiple times, or when the tech lead has not been able to offer complementary skills, expertise or experience to existing staff at the catalyst organisation. Some catalyst staff also indicated that while they had received good support if they asked for something specific, they had been largely left to their own devices and felt that they had to know what they needed in order to get input from the tech lead.

The tech lead role varies in line with the approach and needs of the catalysts and the varying skill sets of the tech leads. This is broadly positive for the programme as there is scope to put emphasis on different skills and experience depending on the local context. However, one person will never have all the relevant skills and experience needed in each area, and whilst there is an agreement that the expertise of individual tech leads could be shared amongst catalysts, it seems the relational value of the support has been more important than the specific skillset, and therefore that match has been quite crucial to get right.

Peer network

The peer network between catalysts gives them a platform to share learning, celebrate successes and to give and receive advice, through a programme of learning camps, an online forum, and facilitated conversations. These relationships have built up over time, which has resulted in a community of trust as well as strong bilateral relationships being built between individual catalyst organisations.

The learning camps organised by Co-operatives UK and attended primarily by catalysts and community businesses as well as representatives from Power to Change and the tech leads, have been an important but subtle way of uniting the people involved in the programme and making everyone involved feel part of something bigger.

One of the reasons the peer network appears to work so well is because of its informal nature, the friendships and trust that have been built over time, and the low-pressure environment. The learning camps have been pitched at a level that is inclusive and without hierarchy, and have been designed to try and value everyone's views and experiences. Because of this, the learning camps have provided a safe and professional space to share ideas, as well as an opportunity to showcase work and to influence each other and national organisations like NEF, CLES, Power to Change, and Renaisi. This has encouraged the catalysts to be more outward facing and grow confidence in engaging in strategic conversations about the social economy more broadly.

We are oversubscribed for the learning camps; everyone wants to go – Catalyst Staff, CA10

The workshops and presentations at the learning camps have enabled the catalysts and community businesses to hear about approaches to delivery elsewhere, which has meant that social time, as well as being valuable for building relationships, has also been used as a purposeful networking space.

It was great to have a such range of people doing very different things with different approaches and having some really like critical voices in that room
– Community Business Staff, CB2

Platforms like WhatsApp and a bespoke learning forum (designed by Kineo) have been used to enhance informal learning opportunities, and share successes and challenges, ideas, opportunities and for people in the programme to open up to each other and seek advice. Opinions shared on the forum have even evolved into blogs that have been posted on Power to Change's website. The strong relationships and high levels of trust developed by the peer network are evidenced by the frequency and nature of contact between the catalyst organisations and the success of the programme portal which is used regularly by catalyst staff across the Empowering Places cohort.

Over the course of the programme, the catalysts have got to know each other well enough to know what they might learn from each other and some catalysts have reflected that when one catalyst organisation is missing from a meeting or discussion, their presence and perspectives are missed. The support element of the network has also intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic during which all the activity has been taken online and there has been a heavier focus on sharing of experiences.

However, the ambition of the programme to bring together funders, delivery partners, tech leads, catalyst staff and volunteers and community businesses to learn from each other, means the level at which to pitch some of the activities does not work for all audiences. For example, there have been suggestions that community businesses would take value from more targeted sessions. Others hold the opinion that the learning camps could more usefully focus on policy and influencing at a national level.

I'd like to see more real sort of digging into, like, strategic economic policy or go and get national speakers from government in... Just a little bit more higher-level policy and strategy – Catalyst Staff, CA7

The investment of two to three days required by catalysts and community businesses to attend learning camps is substantial, and questions have been raised about whether this is too long, as it can make attending inaccessible to some. Some have suggested that one-on-one study visits might be of more value for some people.

*Our ambition to have a lovely, friendly relationship-based space...
Can sometimes distract us from the need to create real value from provision
of content or technical skills at the learning camps – Programme Staff, PS2*

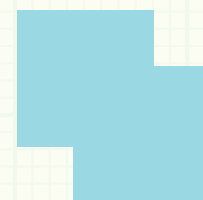
Capacity support provider pool

Use of the capacity support provider pool has increased throughout the programme. Initially the process was considered quite complex, and only gave access to support from quality assured national organisations, usually with prior relationships with the catalysts. Power to Change and Co-operatives UK took on feedback and made changes to improve the accessibility of the pool, including allowing catalysts to bring on board their own local providers who were also quality assured; creating a call-out process for catalysts to request support with a minimal brief; and opening the pool up to include a range of more specific or specialist skills. Over time the ring fencing of part of the catalyst's capacity support funds for use in the support provider pool only was also removed, allowing more flexibility in the use of the overall capacity support budget.

One of the challenges originally identified with the provider pool was that catalysts did not have the capacity to engage with finding support. The new call-out process, which allows catalysts to put out mini tenders, works well because it saves time for the catalysts when searching for the right provider, as well as giving them more power and ownership of the process. Catalysts have also used an informal review process and have chosen to work with providers based on recommendations from each other, highlighting trust amongst the cohort and the importance of the peer network.

One of the barriers to accessing the provider pool has been the large number of providers available, which despite changes to the process, can be confusing to navigate, especially with new providers being brought in to the programme. Whilst the tech lead and other catalysts can provide some recommendations, some catalysts still report challenges in knowing which providers are good in different contexts and why. Initially there was also a challenge with the cost of capacity support as all the providers are costed at the same day rate of £500, which was considered to be high by some of the catalyst organisations who are used to operating more frugally.

One interviewee pointed out that many of the providers had skills already held by the catalysts such as community development. And although Power to Change has made significant changes to the provider pool to include a different variety of skills, some catalysts have identified there are still gaps for additional providers delivering specific support in financial planning and accounting, community shares, branding and PR, community accountancy, and surveying.



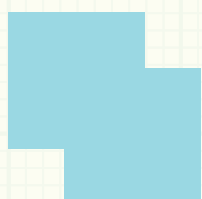
Innovation stream

Co-operatives UK have set up an innovation strand which builds on the programme capacity support by providing opportunities for catalyst and community business staff to get involved in cohort-wide activities and training, such as enterprise business support, enterprise coaching, and power and stakeholder mapping. Support from the innovation stream is currently in its early stages, and therefore the full range of benefits have not yet been realised. However, the value of taking part in enterprise coaching was emphasised by some catalysts, as well as the opportunity to do this with fellow catalyst staff.

The catalysts also benefit from being connected to other national organisations through connections brokered by Power to Change and the delivery partners. For example, they have been given opportunities to take part in the M&S Community Business Challenge, attend policy influencing sessions with Demos, and the opportunity to engage in the design and support of other programmes being developed by Co-operatives UK.

Summary of key points about capacity support

- **The strength of relationships between different partners has been a key enabler for how effectively support has been accessed; this applies both to the value and use of the tech lead role by catalysts, as well as the catalysts' confidence in each other's recommendations from the provider pool.**
- **The catalysts and programme delivery partners have benefited from a strong peer network and the exchange of ideas, which has encouraged them to be more ambitious in their aims and access added-value opportunities.**
- **The catalysts have been given opportunities to feed in to the programme design as the programme has progressed, and the programme has responded to requests for change such as improved processes around the support provider pool, which has seen an increase in usage, and greater flexibility in terms of spend.**



06. Catalyst approaches

The interim evaluation report, based on research completed before the Covid-19 pandemic, found that supporting people in areas of high deprivation to take risks associated with starting new businesses requires substantial groundwork through community engagement, opportunities for skills development, community development work and wider placemaking activities. Since the start of the pandemic, the challenges associated with starting a new community business have intensified, and within this context the catalysts have championed a person-centred and relational approach to delivery. This has manifested itself in three distinct but complementary approaches:

- **Engaging with, and building the confidence of the community, through activities like community organising to encourage local people to share ideas and supporting new initiatives that come out of that.**
- **Building skills and capacity of community businesses by developing skills and confidence, connecting community businesses with each other and providing seed funding.**
- **Building networks and resources for a more connected and supportive place for the community to flourish, by using Empowering Places to build outward connections and leverage additional funding to the area, as well as enabling the community to harness power through the acquisition and development of assets for community use.**

Figure 9 represents catalysts operating at these different levels of activity, and Figure 10 provides more detailed examples of what this work looks like in practice.

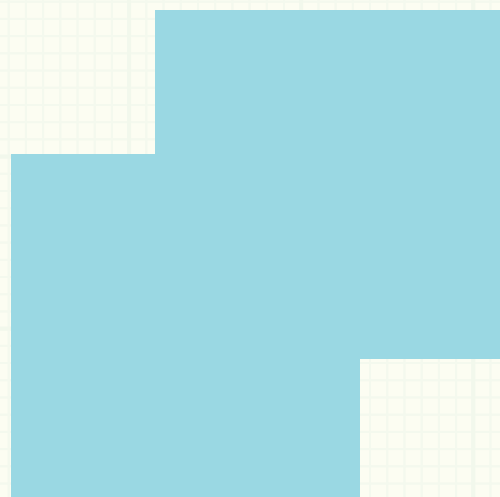


Figure 9: Representation of catalysts supporting a thriving social economy in their place at different levels of influence

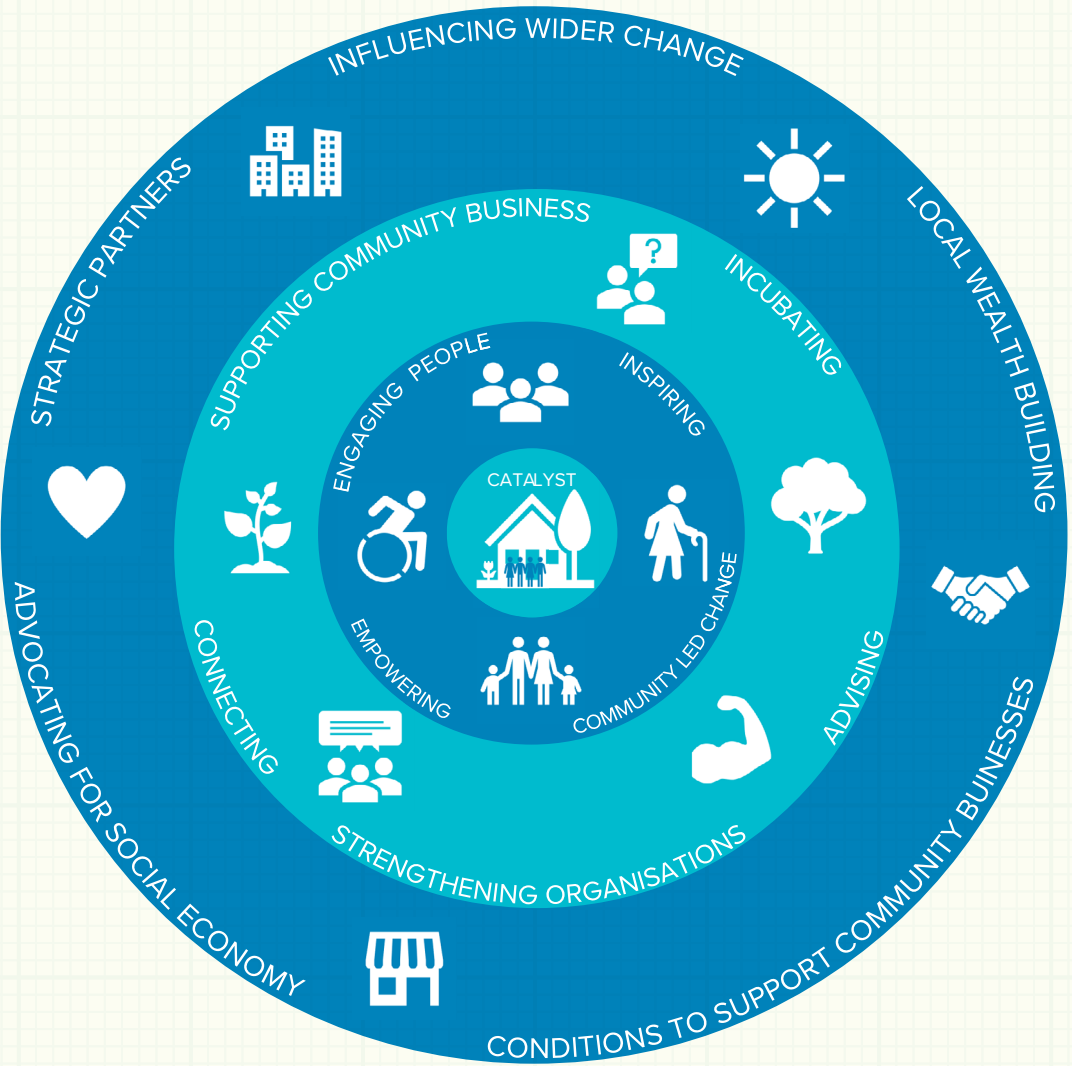
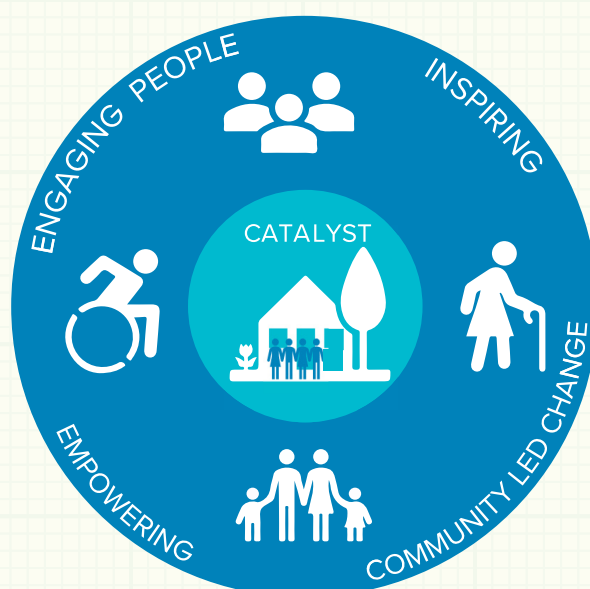


Figure 10: Examples of activities carried out by catalysts using the three distinct approaches: a) engaging with, and building the confidence of the community; b) building skills and capacity of community businesses; and c) building networks for a more connected and supportive place for the community to flourish.

Engaging with, and building the confidence of the community



Engaging People

- B-Inspired has its own network of volunteers and volunteering opportunities that it uses to engage the community with local initiatives. B-Inspired also conducts training such as the “I can, I will.”
- Centre4 has created strong connections with the community through community organising as a result of Empowering Places, including a school programme to engage a local education institutions.
- The Wharton Trust is building on it’s community organising approach, with team members trained to build the capacity of local people and inspire them to make change for themselves.
- Made in Manningham started as a project using an appreciative enquiry approach, and uses grassroots community engagement and marketing to raise awareness, this includes Made in Manningham Markets.
- Real Ideas empowers people as community leaders. For example, they used various community events as a way of engaging the community in the allocation of seed grants.
- AWCC have used community research and creative engagement alongside the development of the Neighbourhood Plan to engage the local community.

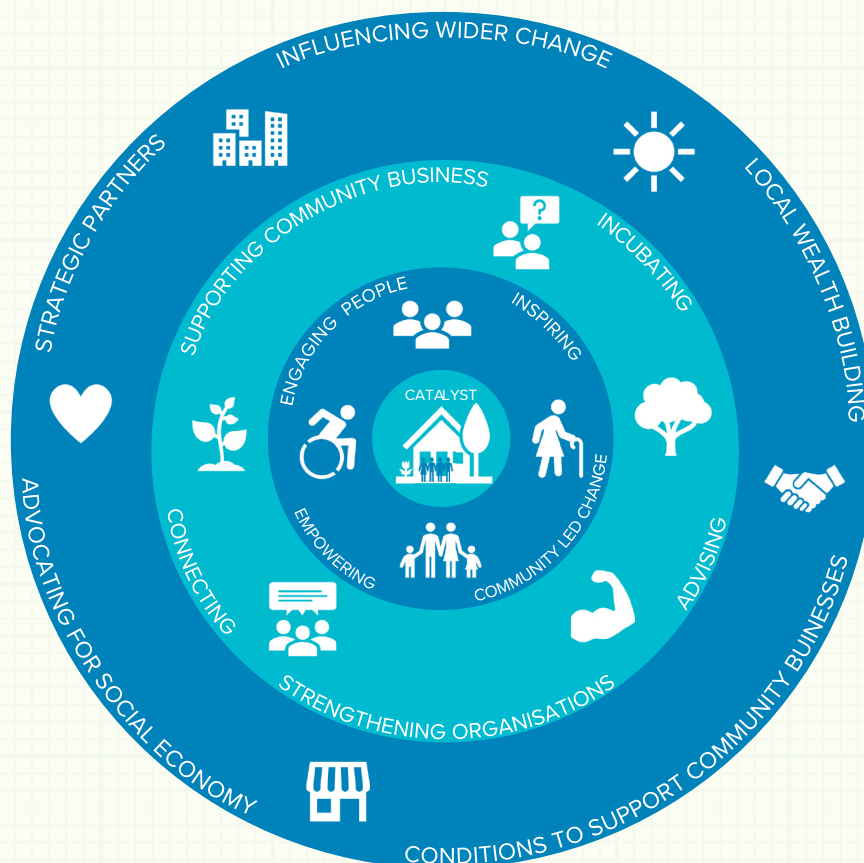
Building skills and capacity of community businesses



Community Businesses

- B-Inspired has hosted community business workshops to enable local citizens to access training on all the considerations, practicalities and skills involved with setting up a business.
- Centre4 runs a Community Business Hub, supporting people to grow their business ideas through business support and collaborative working with other local enterprises.
- Wharton Trust has supported emerging community businesses with seed grants and capacity support. It is also looking to create a network of mutually supportive community businesses.
- Made in Manningham uses an Enterprise Coaching model to support local people in their journey towards sustainable community businesses, this includes providing seed grants and targeted support.
- Real Ideas has engaged and subcontracted two local delivery partners to deliver Empowering Places, providing mentoring support, governance and legal support, as well as business development support.
- AWCC uses participatory budgeting events as a mechanism to distribute seed funding to emerging community businesses. Additionally, AWCC aim to create mutually beneficial clusters of community businesses.

Building networks and resources for a more connected and supportive place for the community to flourish



Wider Change

- B-Inspired has taken on and redeveloped The Grove as a community hub, with the aim of putting this leisure facility back at the heart of the community.
- Centre4 are working on raising the profile of community businesses by exploring opportunities and working with organisations such as Active Humber and the NEL VCSE Alliance.
- Wharton Trust is looking to become more commercially minded and sustainable, with plans to build its asset base in order to give the community more ownership locally. They are also actively engaged with the council on a Local Wealth Building agenda.

- Made in Manningham engage strategically with a wide range of third sector organisations and statutory bodies including attending local partnership meetings across the city.
- Real Ideas continues to be part of various city level conversations, for example to develop an inclusive growth leadership programme as part of the wider city growth plan.
- AWCC has developed its trading arm, Made in Wigan, to increase its strategic profile across the city with a shop in the town centre. It functions as an accessible hub for the community to use. They also have a close relationship with the Wigan Borough Community Partnership and the council.

Catalyst approaches and how they have adapted in response to Covid-19

The programme's focus on strengthening communities, developing community business leaders and improving the conditions for community business to thrive remains important. However, since March 2020, Empowering Places has made a marked shift away from 'catalysing' new businesses, and towards sustaining catalysts and existing community businesses through the pandemic. This is in part due to many of the community businesses not currently being sustainable without the support of the catalyst or the programme; and in part due to the changing nature of the catalysts' role, and local requirements to pivot resources and support local communities in various ways, such as providing direct support for people in need, or working with other local actors to develop networks of referral systems. The next section explores how the three broad approaches above have developed during the programme and have adapted within the context of delivery in a pandemic.

Engaging with, and building the confidence of the community

Interviews with catalyst staff indicate that one of the biggest barriers to supporting and sustaining newer community businesses has been helping people to build confidence and 'take the leap' to pursue their ideas, which has been further exacerbated for people in more disadvantaged areas during the pandemic. The professional advice, development and training provided by Empowering Places has enabled catalysts to grow an understanding of the challenges associated with starting up businesses, which has supported them to nurture and grow the skills and confidence of others.

Building our own confidence to be able to run a community business well has been vital, we have always seen the community as seeking permission to do anything and want to empower them, but we realise we are the same – Community Business Staff, CB8

One of the catalysts described this process as being 'all about building the power of other people'. This has included equipping new business leaders with as much knowledge as possible regarding the realities of starting and running a new business, as well as developing clear pathways and removing discouraging barriers – one catalyst used the example of identifying spaces for community businesses to operate out of.

Programme staff have also learnt that if places are supporting individuals to make that leap, then there is a need to try and replicate the networks that you might find in more affluent areas to ensure that there is a safety net for the community business leaders to fall back on. Seed funding has gone some way to supporting this by giving a small injection of funding, and has also been instrumental in passing on a message of trust that helps to build confidence in community business ideas, and enables new community businesses leaders to grow what they are doing.

The pandemic has disrupted the catalysts' ability to deliver community engagement and empowerment in the same way as they had done before. Much of the activities that sat in this category previously relied on face-to-face outreach through community organising, or engagement with new members of the community through events or trading, or simply being a place people could come to. Therefore, catalysts have largely had to shift their focus away from outreach and towards strengthening and nurturing existing relationships.

Building skills and capacity of community businesses

Business coaching and governance support have been critical to upskilling new community business leaders. This element of capacity building has been considered even more important within the context of Covid-19, which has increased challenges around creating and sustaining effective trading models. Support provided by the catalysts has often been practical and hands on, including: helping community businesses think through possible legal structures, register their organisation, develop financial accounts, create visions, missions and business plans, develop a customer base, promote the business, access funding, access and acquire assets and think through their approach to social impact.

There's a bit about confidence building. We do simple things like business plans, accounts etc. There is a lot of sitting with people and working through things, trying to find ways we can support – Catalyst Staff, CA8

The role of business coaching and governance support requires catalysts to have a comprehensive knowledge of the end-to-end process of setting up different legal structures and business models, as well as understanding what potential barriers might get in the way. Some catalysts have not had the time, resource or required skills and knowledge to deliver this support single-handedly, which has created a demand for expertise from the provider pool. Business coaching organisations like CASE, in Leicester, have put community organisations through a rigorous programme of training modules to help them develop solutions for themselves. In recognition of the challenging nature of the business support and coaching role the catalysts play, Power to Change has also provided opportunities for catalyst staff to take part in Enterprise Coaching training and training with The Relationships Project.

The time taken for this type of support varies depending on the prior knowledge and expertise of community businesses, but has in general required a lot of ‘hand-on’ the part of catalysts. In 2019, catalysts’ quarterly reports on the number of hours their staff were giving in support to community businesses varied considerably across the catalysts but averaged between three and 13 hours of support each week (collectively about 600 hours per quarter) – the equivalent of a full-time person working nine hours a day solely on advising community businesses in the six wards, every day of the year. For some community businesses, the implications of Covid-19 on business models have increased their need for this support, although others have been forced to suspend all activities due to the pandemic.

Some catalysts including Real Ideas in Plymouth have also looked to work with existing local social enterprises or businesses that have the potential to convert to a community business model, as well as focusing on developing start-ups. Catalyst staff feel that following that route may lead to more sustainability and ability to contribute to the local economy than focusing on developing new businesses alone.

Building a more connected and supportive place for the community to flourish

Unlike the other two overarching approaches, which have been made more difficult by Covid-19, the ability to build stronger networks has ironically been made easier since the pandemic began. Catalysts, tech leads and the programme delivery team have reflected that perceptions of the community development sector have shifted because of the pivotal role that many locally rooted community organisations have had in leading effective local responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. This has meant that the value of what the catalysts are doing has become more visible to local authorities and other local stakeholders. The catalysts have been able to use this in many ways to pivot their role as local influencers, including developing good local partnership working, which has the potential to support them to leverage additional funding in the future.

A good example of this has been the partnerships developed by the Ethical Recruitment Agency in Grimsby which is working with business support providers Sector Support and E-Factor, to collaborate on the development of a Community Business Ambassador scheme which would support the social economy in Grimsby, and spread awareness and understanding about community businesses to people in the local area.

Some of the catalysts have also used the shift in focus away from the direct delivery of services (which some have had to stop during the pandemic) to engage in more strategic activities such as growing their asset bases. Interviews with programme staff revealed that the last learning camp to take place before the pandemic, hosted by B-Inspired in February 2020, inspired other catalysts to explore the development of a similar asset-based incubation approach, which demonstrates the powerful role of the peer network in inspiring new ways of working.

Whilst this approach is not new for some catalysts with an existing asset base, others such as AWCC and the Wharton Trust have developed new strategies that build in asset acquisition, which will help them become more sustainable and give the community more ownership locally. For example, within the last year the Wharton Trust has been able to purchase the freehold of its building, as well as utilize other funding to acquire a community shop, and the first two houses of a new housing project – Annexe Housing, which will support it to become an ethical landlord and to reinvest profits locally.

Key learning about catalyst approaches

- The catalysts are delivering the programme at three different levels, focusing on community engagement, developing community business skills, and building networks and resources. All three levels of activity have been impacted by Covid-19 in different ways. Community engagement has been particularly difficult during the pandemic and catalysts have instead focused on reinforcing and strengthening the skills, capacity and confidence of community business leaders they have existing relationships with.**
- In some cases the pandemic has actually been an enabler for catalysts to build stronger networks and focus on resourcing themselves for the future. This is partly due to improved visibility, perception and reliance on the voluntary sector, and consequently being drawn in to more strategic conversations locally; and partly due to being able to use their time away from day-to-day delivery, to develop proactive sustainability strategies, such as plans to acquire new assets.**
- Throughout the period of the pandemic, the catalysts have focused on creating promising conditions for community businesses to thrive. The challenge in the final phase of the programme will be for catalyst to capitalise on those conditions. The three different levels could provide some framework to work within as each requires a variety of skills, knowledge and experience, which varies between the catalysts. Identifying both strengths and opportunities for improvement within these, could be used to support peer learning and reflective development.**

07. Impact

As outlined in the ‘methodology’ section above, this paper focuses on emerging impact as defined and experienced by the catalyst organisations, community businesses and programme staff. It identifies impacts that have occurred at three levels: for the catalyst organisations and their staff, for the individual community businesses, and at a community level, before exploring current views on the likely sustainability of these impacts.

Emerging impact on catalysts

At the catalyst level, four key emerging impacts, both positive and negative, have been identified so far:

- Confidence and skills
- Enhanced relationships, networks and profile
- Increased capacity and a new focus
- Over-reliance on the programme

Confidence and skills

There is a clear sense among the catalyst organisations that being a part of Empowering Places is helping to develop their confidence, both as individual staff members and as organisations. The opportunity to share experiences with each other and learn from approaches that other organisations have taken, is giving some of the catalysts the courage to try new things. Being part of the cohort helps catalysts recognise that they are not alone in the challenges that they face and therefore helps them to feel more confident about the path that they are pursuing. At a personal level, the programme has also helped individual staff members by providing a strong support network that enables their confidence to develop.

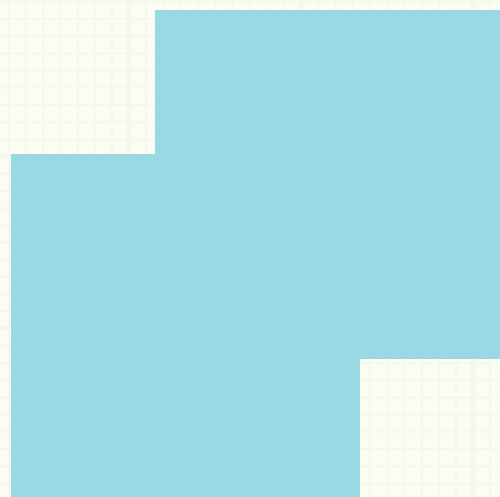
My confidence has grown, it came on the backend of a really low point... So many different aspects of the group, partners, friends, the whole experience has been an eye-opener. I've never been on a job without benefits, this is the first time I am not reliant on tax credits, doing it myself – Catalyst, CA12

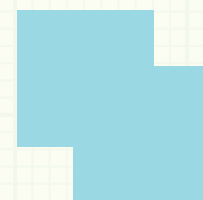
There is also considerable evidence that catalyst staff are learning through the programme. This learning is happening at two different levels. First, staff are gaining new knowledge about specific areas such as enterprise coaching or the technical details of community business governance. This is seen as beneficial not just because they're given the opportunity to learn the mechanics and theory of new approaches but because they are also given the chance to speak to and connect with others who are implementing these approaches regularly and can therefore share their experience at an applied level. The learning is taking place during formal learning experiences such as training, workshops and learning camps but also through the regular engagement that catalysts are having with each other.

It's been a huge learning curve for me and I've just absorbed so much from the experience and feel like I'm able to give more sort of sage advice to people who come to me now based on my learning – Catalyst CA5

Second, staff feel that they are understanding more about community business and social enterprise as a broader movement. Knowing more about the range of possibilities that are available to them as organisations, has expanded their horizons and helped them to understand the role that they can play in the wider sector. Having direct contact with Power to Change, Co-operatives UK, CLES and NEF has enabled some catalyst staff to feel more closely aligned with national conversations that are taking place around the social economy and organisations with a social purpose. One catalyst also reflected on how being a part of the programme had taught them about the importance of unity within the sector and that, despite the many differences between the organisations involved, they were ultimately all striving towards a common goal.

I think I've learnt there's really a need for us all to sort of stop sometimes arguing over who's got the purest governance form for social purpose, and does it matter whether you're a community business, a coop or a social enterprise. I think I've learnt that we've got to be much more pragmatic and say 'come on let's come together to fight the good fight for a better social economy – Catalyst, CA7





Enhanced relationships, networks and profiles

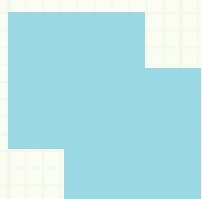
Evidence from catalyst interviews suggests that being a part of the Empowering Places programme is helping to expand and strengthen catalysts' relationships, networks and profiles at community, local and national levels.

The relationships that the catalysts have formed with each other are considered to be one of the central successes of the programme. The strong peer network provides ongoing opportunity for the catalysts to learn from each other and some catalysts have also taken to carrying out more formal mentoring activities with each other. These relationships help to boost catalysts' confidence and expose them to new ways of approaching their activities. The Relationships Project and Enterprise Coaching work has also given the opportunity for catalysts to step into the role of mentor to others (beyond just their local community businesses). Programme staff also recognise the value of the network for providing catalyst staff with an opportunity to step away from their roles and take time to reflect with like-minded individuals and have some fun.

It's also just quite joyful, I think it's a really important outcome. I think that's been a big part of the learning camps... people don't often get the chance to move away from their job, to reflect on their job with people doing a similar thing. But also just to enjoy each other's company. And I think that's quite an important investment. I hope people will look back on the five years of the programme... and think there was quite a lot of humour and joy in the exploration of what we've done – Programme Staff, PS2

Catalysts and their tech leads spoke about the benefits of forming relationships not only with each other but with all of the organisations involved in the programme delivery and felt that these relationships helped them to access new contacts, tap into the national debate in a way that might otherwise not have been possible, and build their credibility as organisations.

I think having the Power to Change brand is really helpful as well, it brings a lot of legitimacy. And to say they're working with NEF and Coops and CLES – Tech Lead, TL1



Many of the catalysts already had strong relationships with local stakeholders, including local councils. However, the programme has provided opportunities for these types of relationships to strengthen and extend. Real Ideas in Plymouth, for example, is very well networked as an organisation, but interview evidence suggests that being part of the programme has given it the opportunity to strengthen its relationships, make new ones and have more agency in its interaction with local partners. For example, Real is also a strategic partner of the RISE Trade Up programme delivered by the Rank Foundation, and so has been able to connect its developing community businesses with additional development opportunities delivered by Rank.

That's been really powerful for me to see the network in action and to take inspiration from it quite frankly – Community Business Staff, CB3

Likewise, Centre4 in Grimsby was already well known and very active in its local area but lacked the capacity to develop its partnerships in the way it would have liked. The resources and connections provided through Empowering Places have enabled Centre4 to build on these networks and to connect outwards with organisations outside of the immediate area. The catalyst organisations who had fewer local relationships before the programme, have taken inspiration from others in the cohort and the nature of the relationships that they have locally, and made attempts to replicate those relationships in their local area. This strengthening of local partnerships has helped the catalyst organisations to get involved in more strategic, place level conversations and to feel like they have a seat at the table during relevant discussions.

I think it's given an opportunity and a window for more conversation to happen on a local and more strategic level – Catalyst CA5

Catalyst organisations have also found that because of these strengthened relationships and their involvement in the programme, their profile is raising both locally and nationally. For example, the Chief Executive of B-Inspired, Leicester, has always been well connected but has found that she is now getting more invitations to speak at conferences and share B-Inspired's experiences. Likewise, The Wharton Trust in Hartlepool's increased engagement with local stakeholders has resulted in the organisation being drawn into more place-level conversations and being asked to take part in policy and influencing work, which in turn, has led to local and national media opportunities.

Dyke House are now part of a wider Hartlepool consortium. We would not have been involved with that partnership without Empowering Places – Catalyst staff, CA11

In some cases, the new networks and raised profile that catalysts have experienced have led directly to additional funding opportunities which have been highly beneficial. Programme staff felt one of the longer-term impacts of the programme may be that catalysts have both the confidence and profile to better advocate for their places, meaning that they are able to generate more funding and push for change to improve the local area.

Some catalysts also credit the programme with enhancing their relationships at a community level. Through the development of community businesses, the catalyst organisations are accessing community members that they have not typically engaged with before and this is not only helping them to learn more about their communities but to raise their profile and reputation in the local area.

I think we've gained a lot more collaboration and conversation with our communities... Although we could always be doing more... but I feel like it's opened up those conversations a bit more. I think it's made us more accessible in a way – Catalyst, CA5

Increased capacity and a new focus

Being a part of Empowering Places has enhanced the capacity of the catalyst organisations considerably. The resources available through the programme have enabled the catalysts to employ new staff and therefore to extend the range of activities that they deliver. At Centre4 in Grimsby, the team now have a Programme Coordinator, whose role it is to strengthen the infrastructure of the organisation and local community businesses; they have also used some of the Empowering Places funding to support two community organisers. This means that the organisation has been able to extend and embed its connections within the local community.

This experience was echoed by other catalysts, some of whom felt that the programme had given them the opportunity to diversify some of the roles within their organisations and to grow their skills base as well as their capacity. In some cases, this has led to the catalyst organisations reaching and working with sections of their community who would otherwise have been harder to support and engage with.

It's enabled us to focus on and grow and support the growth of a bunch of organisations and community businesses that we would otherwise have struggled to help – Catalyst CA4

**I think we've
gained a
lot more
collaboration**

– and conversation with our communities...

Although we could always be doing more... but I feel like it's opened up those conversations a bit more.

I think it's made us more accessible in a way

Catalyst, CA5

Having more capacity as well as inspiration from the programme network has allowed some of the catalyst organisations to shift their direction and focus. This has manifested in a range of ways. Many catalysts have become more externally focused: having previously focused on the hyper-local, there is a tangible shift in some of the organisations' direction to something that encompasses a wider community. This is partly a result of catalyst organisations making new contacts and expanding their networks. However, programme staff feel that being part of Empowering Places has also helped some catalyst leads to help recognise the strategic value of the work that they undertake and so feel more confident about expanding their reach and raising their local profile.

I genuinely think that all of them have come on a journey in recognising their role in the local economy – Programme Staff PS1

The programme has also inevitably shifted the catalysts' focus slightly towards community businesses. Many of the catalyst organisations had not worked directly with community businesses before or had few in their local communities, so being part of the programme represents a change in direction for them and has given them the opportunity to explore something new. B-Inspired in Leicester for example has a long history of working closely with the local community and had previously been offered the opportunity to take on The Grove, a former council-run sports centre. However, the organisation did not have a clear plan for how they would use it at that point. Empowering Places provided them with an obvious focus and a viable plan for the building which centered around housing some of the community businesses as well as expanding some of their existing activities such as renting out office space.

The contact and engagement that the Empowering Places catalysts have with each other has led to them understand more about each other's activities and, in some cases, to adopt elements of each other's approaches. AWCC in Wigan, for example, is one of the smaller catalysts and has taken inspiration from B-Inspired in Leicester to develop their trading arm. Likewise both AWCC and the Wharton Trust in Hartlepool, have taken inspiration from some of the larger organisations like Real Ideas and B-Inspired to develop their asset base.

Finally, the programme has led some of the catalyst organisations to learn more about community organising and enterprise coaching and to embed these approaches into their work more, both within and outside of the Empowering Places workstream.

Over-reliance on the programme

While the majority of the impacts identified are positive, there are also some risks and challenges identified as a result of programme activity. This includes catalyst organisations potentially becoming over-reliant on the programme. As identified above, the programme has greatly increased catalysts' capacity and innovation. Some have hired new staff with programme funds, or developed new workstreams. Programme staff expressed concern about whether all of the catalysts would be able to sustain these activities once the programme ends. Empowering Places was designed in part to build capacity in each of the places and while catalyst capacity has certainly extended, it remains to be seen whether it has become embedded and will be sustained once programme funding comes to an end.

Emerging impact on community businesses

At the community business level, three key emerging impacts have been identified so far:

- Development of new community businesses
- New skills, confidence and opportunities
- Improved partnerships, networks and profiles

Development of new community businesses

One of the central objectives of the Empowering Places programme was for catalysts to nurture a cluster of sustainable community businesses that collaborate to make their place better. At the time of writing there are a number of community businesses being developed in each place, ranging between five in Leicester and 12 in Plymouth. Some of these existed previously, albeit with a different governance structure, while others have been developed as part of the programme.

The catalysts and the community business staff themselves believe that many of the community businesses, either would not have existed or risked stagnating without support from the programme. In Grimsby, for example, it is unlikely that Centre4's largest community business ERA would be sustainably trading without Empowering Places funding.

Interview evidence suggests that Empowering Places is providing catalysts and individual community members with the knowledge, skills and confidence to develop businesses in a way that would not have been possible previously. Some community businesses we spoke to articulated how, without Empowering Places, they would not have known where to start or who to speak to locally.

Really gave me an opportunity that's just unmissable... I could never ever have funded this myself or indeed maybe would have even thought about it, I would have thought it was well beyond my reach – Community Business CB3

Other community businesses might have existed, but credit the programme with either extending or embedding their activity and giving them the additional resource and support needed to make a go of their venture.

I think things would have stagnated with what we could have achieved. It's 100% allowed us to push the business forward in what is and could have been a really difficult time – Community Business CB4

While there is considerable evidence of the success of each catalyst in developing community businesses, what is not yet known is either how sustainable these businesses will be in future or whether they will have significant impact on their local communities, either individually or collectively.

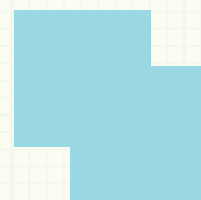
Many of the community businesses that are being developed have also been heavily impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. In Leicester, for example, two of the community businesses were on the cusp of signing the paperwork to become legal entities when the city was plunged into lockdown. The central hub in which the majority of B-Inspired's community businesses are based, The Grove, had opened just weeks earlier and there were early signs that the developing community businesses were going to get a lot of trade. But nearly a year without income has set them back considerably and if these businesses survive, their journey towards sustainability and collective impact will inevitably be much longer and harder.

New skills, confidence and opportunities

As with the catalysts, staff within the community businesses have found that the support provided through the programme has helped them to develop new skills, grow their confidence and explore different opportunities.

Through the capacity support element of the programme, community business staff have been able to access training on areas such as governance and the mechanics of running a business as well as more specific support around areas such as marketing and social media.

So the impact is real, you know we've got groups there that have been through business start-up training programmes for free that they would not have had access to, a level of mentorship that they would not have had access to – Catalyst, CA1



It opened a network of expertise and mentorship to you and it also really allows you to really be in that environment of like that real business world. And it definitely helps you put your business cap on in that sense – Community Business, CB4

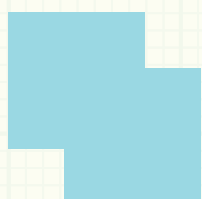
Some community businesses have also attended part of the learning camps and have enjoyed the opportunity to meet like-minded people from other sectors and other areas of the country, but who are facing similar challenges in establishing their businesses.

That to me was absolutely amazing, it was really, really good because there's a lot of people out there with the same passion that I've got myself – Community Business, CB1

There is a clear theme among the community business staff that being a part of the programme has helped to build their confidence as well as their skills. Having the ongoing support of their catalysts, other delivery partners and the wider programme network is enabling community businesses to make steps that might otherwise have felt too daunting or even impossible.

Building our own confidence to be able to run a community business well has been vital, we have always seen the community as seeking permission to do anything and want to empower them, but we realise we are the same – Community Business, CB8

Where several community businesses are being developed or 'incubated' together, staff have also really valued the peer support that this generates and the confidence it brings. In Leicester, for example, B-inspired has recently hired two community development workers to support the development of a community shop and community cafe at the same time. This means that staff from the businesses have attended training sessions together and are able to share tasks and actively support each other's development which has been hugely welcomed and not only made good use of available resources, but helped to boost staff confidence too.



Building our own confidence to be able to run a community business

– well has been vital, we have always seen the community as seeking permission to do anything and want to empower them, but we realise we are the same

And the programme is presenting staff of community businesses with new opportunities. Some individuals would simply not have considered trying to set up a community business before, while others were previously interested in the idea but lacked the resources or skills to take the first steps. There is a sense of enormous gratitude among some of the community business staff. In some cases, the opportunity to get involved in a community business has presented them with a focus, skills and a job at a time that they really needed it. In one example an individual was made redundant and was approached by their local catalyst about exploring the potential for developing the community group they had been running for years into a formal community business. For that individual, the support and training she has received through the programme has been “brilliant” and like a “bright light” at the time that she needed it. Others are grateful for the opportunity that the programme has given them to give something back to their community and make a difference.

Improved partnerships, networks and profile

Being part of the Empowering Places programme has not only connected community business staff with the catalyst organisation and the wider programme partners, but often with local stakeholders and other community businesses or social enterprises in their local areas.

Where a catalyst themselves is well networked this is often translating to the community businesses who are benefitting from the catalysts’ standing in the local area. Made in Manningham’s large network in Bradford, for example, has helped to open doors for its network of community businesses and connect them with other people in the local area who can support their development. Similarly, one Plymouth community business spoke about how Real Ideas had put them in touch with a local organisation that supports social enterprise and as part of that programme they had received monthly support sessions and a quarterly grant to help develop the business, in addition to the support that they are getting through Empowering Places. This business felt that the connections they had made through Real Ideas had really helped their network to grow and they had met lots of relevant people they had never connected with before.

My network has absolutely exploded round about the people who I want to talk to – Community Business, CB3

Through the catalyst organisations, community businesses are also starting to network with each other. While it is impossible to know whether this would have happened without Empowering Places, the role of the catalyst as a central focal point is certainly playing a key role in linking the developing community businesses, not only with each other but with other social enterprises and community organisations in the area.

I think it's really kind of joined up those different little pockets of people that interact with each other as community businesses better – Catalyst, CA5

Emerging impact on local people and community

As already identified, it has been much harder to explore impacts at the community level and these insights do not draw on the voices of community members themselves, both because the community businesses are largely not yet well established enough to be well known by local communities and because Covid-19 has made accessing local residents much harder.

However, data from interviews with programme staff, catalyst organisations and community businesses indicate that there are some emerging impacts in some of the places. This section therefore explores what these impacts look like so far and the extent to which they are perceived to be happening. The emerging impacts that have been identified so far include:

- Improved services
- Increased positive focus on the community
- Increased community organising

Improved services

Driven by a desire to meet the needs of local people, many of the community businesses that are being developed provide services that are beneficial to the community. These cover a range of sectors. In Hartlepool for example, the Wharton Trust has supported the development of Stags, a mental health support group for men, that was initially set up in response to the unmet need for mental health services in the local area. Stags supported 60 people in October 2020 alone. When interviewed, the founder of the organisation spoke of working alongside 17 individuals who were in very dire situations. The impact of the support Stags provides has been both immediate and will be long-term, with the group acknowledging it can take months for people to come out of their shell.

Covid has struck everybody with mental health, really bad situations happened really quickly because of Covid. Providing social interaction and getting people out of the house is how we have been able to support them – Community Business Staff

In Wigan, two emerging community businesses, Men's Sheds and MissPlaces, have been set up to support the wellbeing of men and women respectively by developing skills and confidence, and supporting entrepreneurship through making. As of Autumn 2020, the groups were supporting in the region of 100 and 150 people per week across the local borough.

In Leicester, the two community businesses that were up and running before Covid restrictions came in were thought to be providing a valuable service to the community. The football club was filling a gap as there was previously no football club in the area. When it opened it got a large take up from local children because it was designed to be financially accessible to families. The dance group which also runs out of The Grove is equally popular. While the group primarily offers dance classes for children and adults of all ages, the group also aims to fill a gap in local provision by using the knowledge it gains of local families through the group to signpost them to relevant services. The group also runs occasional discussion sessions for local young people and links with other services that run out of The Grove to refer young people to when needed.

And in Grimsby, the Ethical Recruitment Agency, incubated and set up by Centre4 using Empowering Places funding, has successfully taken on multiple temporary and permanent contracts for the council during Covid-19 lockdowns and has been able to help people into work, provide training and build confidence. A community gym, also supported by Centre4, has already started to provide the local community with access to affordable exercise opportunities and has created a space in which local people can socialise and make new connections, as well as giving some of the more involved members ownership and responsibility for running it.

While there are obvious community benefits to all these services, many of them have also been set up to fill the gaps left by years of budget cuts and other austerity measures. Some programme participants feel there is a danger that by stepping in to fill the gaps left by austerity, these community businesses risk normalising the damage done to local communities by reduced public sector spending. Programme staff reflected on this point and spoke about the controversy of social prescribing within the programme for example. While some of the Empowering Places cohort think social prescribing can be beneficial for communities, others are concerned that if community businesses take on social prescribing, the local council is effectively offloading responsibility and difficult work onto small and underfunded organisations. There is also the risk that any local services that are developed under the programme flourish while the programme is running, but prove to be unsustainable without it, therefore setting these communities back considerably.

Increased positive focus on the community

While it is early days for the programme in terms of its potential impact on local communities, there is emerging evidence that Empowering Places is resulting in a heightened focus on the local communities in which the programme is delivered. This is manifesting in three ways. First, Empowering Places has enabled some of the catalyst organisations to connect with their local communities more and to deliver community organising approaches. In Grimsby for example, where the catalyst organisation has staff trained by Community Organisers Ltd, the team has used some of the Empowering Places grant to fund two community organisers. The purpose of these roles is to reach out to members of the local community and connect with local people who may have business ideas, or feel passionate about particular issues in the local area. Although the community organising approach hasn't yet led to any new community businesses, what the team has been able to do is create conditions for local people to feel supported, grow in confidence, build their networks and connections and take part in social action.

In Hartlepool, the catalyst and community businesses are using community organising to try and help increase the sense of pride and ownership among the local community. Research shows there is a lack of ambition in Hartlepool and negative opinions linked to the town, and one community business told the evaluation team that they want local residents to celebrate their town. They plan to do this by linking with existing groups and using creative approaches to community organising. Programme staff interviewed also felt that those catalysts who had known less about community organising approaches at the start of the programme, were now more interested in them or indeed using them effectively in their communities.

Second, in some cases the programme has helped to provide new spaces or focal points for the community. In Leicester for example, being part of the Empowering Places programme has enabled the catalyst organisation, B-Inspired, to take on the running of The Grove, a previously disused council building. Both catalyst and community business staff felt that, despite the fact that the Grove was only open for a short time before Covid restrictions came in, The Grove has provided a much needed central community focus to the Braunstone area.

We have a better beat in the community, we have a home... for everybody, regardless you know, it doesn't matter whether you're two in a family or ten in a family, you're all welcome there. It's an amazing building and that opportunity just would not have happened without Empowering Places – Community Business, CB1

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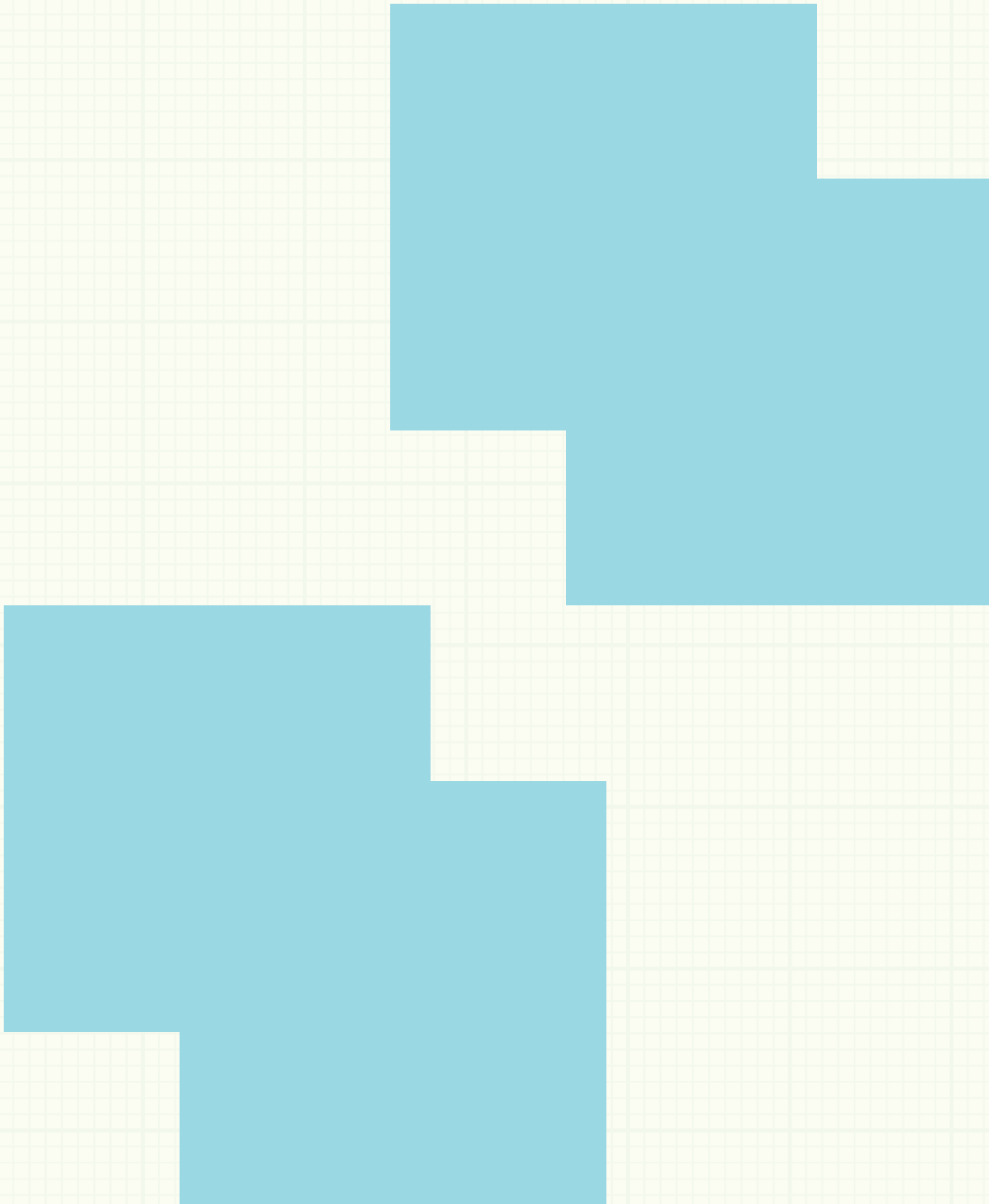
Finally, the programme is supporting the delivery of community businesses that are aimed at improving the local environment so that it delivers more for residents. In Plymouth, for example, Pollenize, a conservation project that uses pollination and rewilding, is putting hives in areas that have high levels of deprivation. The hope is that by improving the pollination in the area, that will help local green spaces to look better and ultimately have an impact on the wellbeing of local residents. The Pollenize team is also hoping to work with the catalyst, Real Ideas, to find ways to connect with the local community they are working in in order to get them more involved in the project. This might include offering some form of apprenticeship for local residents, for example.

Sustainability of the programme impact

There are mixed views about the extent to which the impacts that have been experienced so far are sustainable beyond the programme's lifetime. Some community businesses are optimistic about their future and feel that the community's need and support for their services will help to secure longer-term profitability. However, others are less convinced. In part this is due to the impact of Covid-19 which has made everything less certain. Some community businesses have also effectively lost a valuable year of trading, during which the programme would still have been in full swing and would have been able to act as a safety net if the business needed additional support or needed to change direction or tactics in some way. Now, not only has that supported year been lost, but at the time of writing, it remains unclear when local economies will be able to fully recover. This means that there may, theoretically, be very little of the programme left to run at the point that some of the fledgling community businesses get the chance to take their first steps into trading.

Beyond the impact of Covid-19, there is also a wider skepticism about the potential for longer-term impacts. Some catalysts and community businesses, while fully supportive of the programme's aims and approach, feel that there is a limit to what a place-based programme of this nature can achieve within a five-year timeframe. Although five years is a long time in 'traditional' programme terms, it is relatively little time in which to build the interest, skills and capacity of local residents in deprived communities, particularly at a time of huge austerity and economic uncertainty. There is also a sense that while Empowering Places is a good start, for there to be meaningful and sustained impact, whole systems change is required. Empowering Places offers high levels of investment and support but what it can deliver is a drop in the ocean compared to the scale of the challenges faced by the local communities that it supports. If impacts are to be sustained over a longer period of time, the right set of local conditions, partnerships and funding opportunities will be required.

Despite concerns about the longer-term sustainability of the programme, there are high levels of consensus among programme staff, catalysts and community businesses that, while sustainable businesses take a long time to develop, Empowering Places is helping to get them off to a good start.

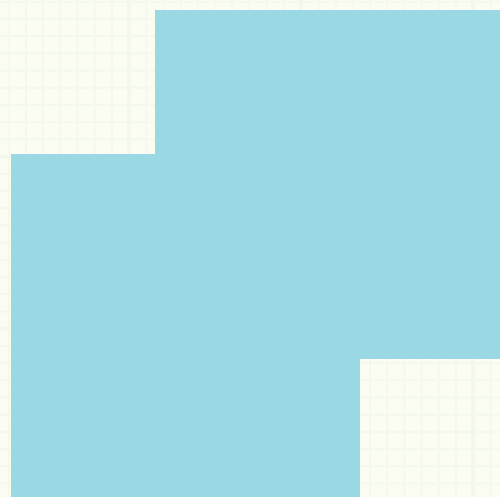


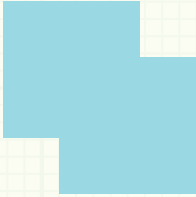
08. Conclusions

Empowering Places is a programme that encompasses high levels of diversity. It operates in a range of local contexts and supports a diverse cohort of catalyst organisations and community businesses. This diversity has been embraced by both catalysts and community businesses who despite considerable differences, have found areas of commonality and formed a strong peer network that sits at the heart of the programme. The range of experiences within the programme also provides valuable opportunities for learning both among the catalyst cohort and at a programme level to understand how Empowering Places is delivering different types of change.

The substantial flexibility that the programme offers works well for the diverse contexts of the six places. Catalyst organisations have taken advantage of the programme's flexibility to use the resources and support available in a range of ways, in pursuit of similar aims. Having the flexibility to make decisions in a way that responds to their local context has allowed catalysts to gradually build an approach that works in their area, strengthen their local networks and has put them in a stronger position within their communities.

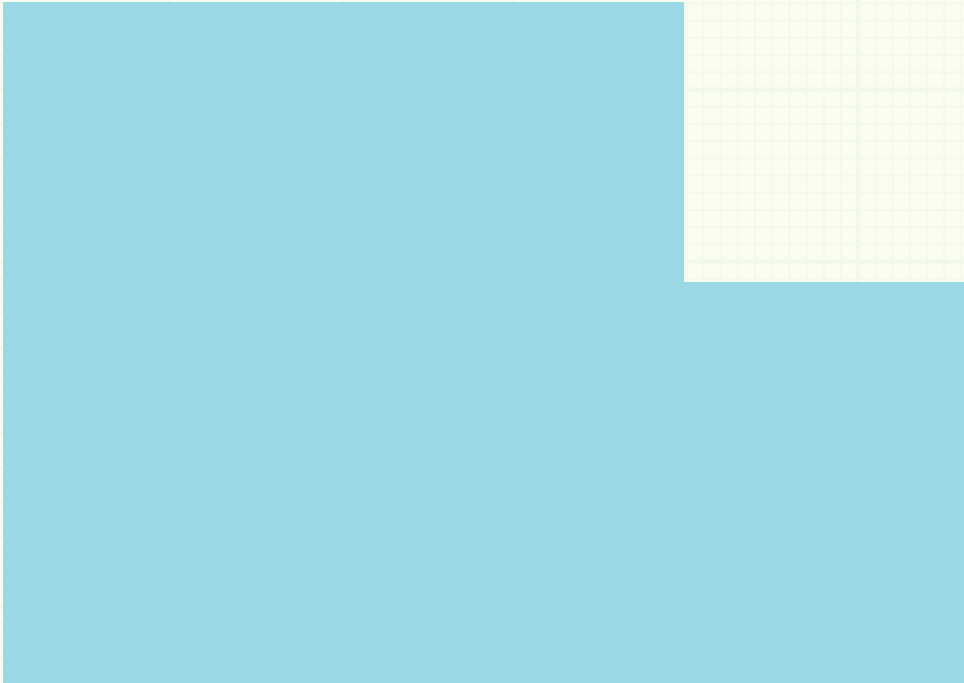
Central to the programme's offer is the combination of both funding and capacity support; neither would work well without the other. People and organisations in the six places need funding because of a lack of local wealth to invest in new (or indeed existing) business ventures, but they also need support and inspiration from the programme to build skills, networks, confidence and a sense that their ambitions are achievable. The range of tailored capacity support available to catalysts, including tech lead support, is playing a significant role in supporting them to deliver in their places and has highlighted the value of specialist, technical advice and support. However, it is perhaps the peer support network that has had the most universal traction. The strength of the relationships within the programme has grown considerably over its term and particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrating the importance of strong professional and personal ties to provide support during times of crisis. The peer network has also notably enhanced the programme offer; catalysts have inspired each other to try new things and facilitated learning in a way that the programme delivery partners would not have been able to provide alone.

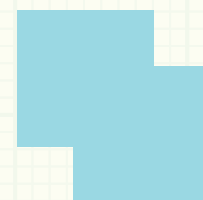




Catalysts are using Empowering Places to pursue change at three different levels – in engaging their community, in supporting community businesses, and at a more strategic level to improve conditions in their wider place. All catalysts had made promising progress pre-Covid-19 and several had nascent community businesses starting to show some promise. However, Covid-19 has inevitably had a fundamental impact on the delivery of the programme – it has slowed community business development, is likely to lead to the failure of some, and in many cases has made community engagement activities much harder. Ironically however, it has also galvanized work on the third level of activity, by creating more promising conditions for strategic work and giving catalysts the opportunity to contribute to conversations about how best to improve their local places. To capitalise on this progress, catalysts need the capacity to maintain consistency and stay focused on these goals, as well as time to get community activities up and running again.

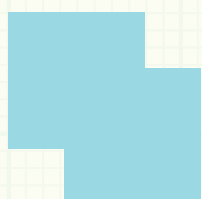
The evidence so far suggests some promising emerging outcomes for Empowering Places. Catalysts and community businesses are developing confidence, skills and capacity which are translating into the successful development of community businesses. Partnerships and networks are also being strengthened for the catalyst organisations and the community businesses that they support which bodes well for their ongoing role in their places. And there is some emerging evidence that the programme is starting to have an impact on the local areas through the provision of new services and an increased focus on local communities. Overall, there is considerable positivity about the programme and the impacts that it has delivered so far but also a healthy skepticism about the potential for these impacts to be sustained and result in longer-term changes for the six communities. This is particularly given the backdrop of austerity measures and lack of other sources of investment, the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the need for more systemic change beyond what this programme alone can deliver.





Learning to date about Empowering Places suggests the following implications for other place-based funding programmes with similar aims and scope:

- **Developing skills, capacity and change is a long-term endeavour. Places need a long lead time to adapt their approach to their local contexts and to provide the consistency of support and resource that is required, particularly in areas of high deprivation. Five years is therefore perhaps the minimum time needed for a place-based programme of this type.**
- **Flexibility within a place-based programme is fundamental for allowing the programme's offer to be successfully tailored to meet the varying needs of local areas. However, there is a balance to be struck between having aims that are well-defined enough and a structure that is loose enough to allow places to respond to their local contexts. In practice, this likely means that there will need to be a period of development and learning factored into place-based programmes to allow the creation of the right offer for each place.**
- **The combination of both funding and capacity support is crucial for this type of place-based programme. However, time needs to be factored in to allow for trial and error around the level and balance of each.**
- **Relationships and trust as well as the time needed for these to develop are central to the success of place-based programmes. This means programmes need to be designed in a way that maximises opportunities for relationships to flourish. Empowering Places has benefitted from being sufficiently generous that there is little competition created between places, and from having a flexible, informal approach that has encouraged programme participants to experiment, challenge and learn from each other. Other place-based programmes should consider how best to create opportunities for relationships to develop at varying levels of the programme and in a way that supports the programme's ultimate aims.**
- **Where a programme is as flexible, locally tailored, evolving and complex as Empowering Places this can create challenges around communication and learning. Empowering Places and similar place-based programmes may therefore benefit from considering ways in which the core elements of the programme can be distilled into a model that can be more easily shared and learnt from.**



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