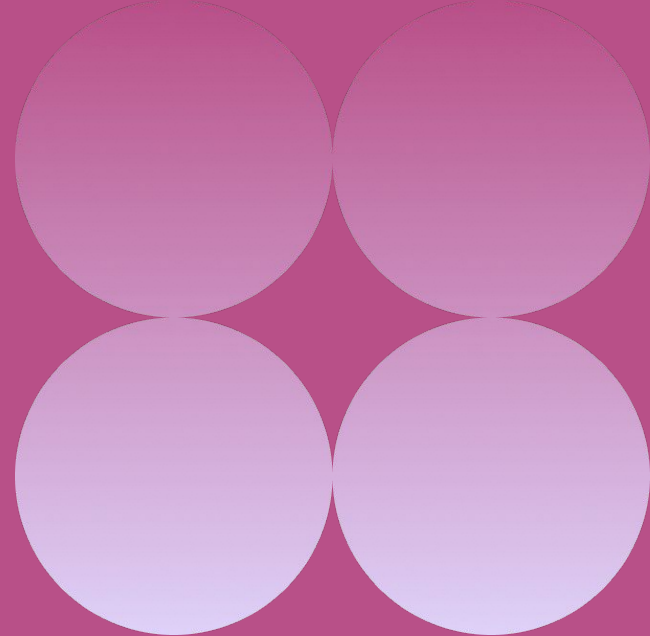


Community participation discovery research

**A participatory approach to renewing
Adur & Worthing Councils' support
strategy for inclusive and resilient
community participation and
enterprise**

February 2025



About this report

In September 2024, Adur & Worthing Councils partnered with Ideas Alliance to carry out participatory research. The goal was to co-evolve the outcomes and qualities of council support and grant-making for community groups, voluntary groups and social enterprises 2025–2028. This report tells the story of the research, what we learned and next steps. It has been written to be useful to partners, elected members, officers and citizens.

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Why and how did we do this research

The research process

The research methods

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What did we learn

The stories of our times

The questions we're

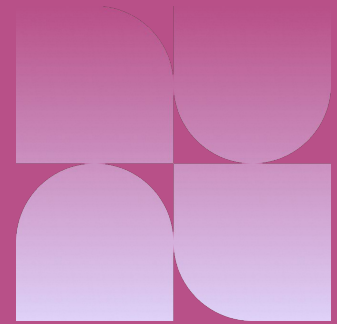
holding for the future

03

How we can use the research

Next steps

Your use of this report

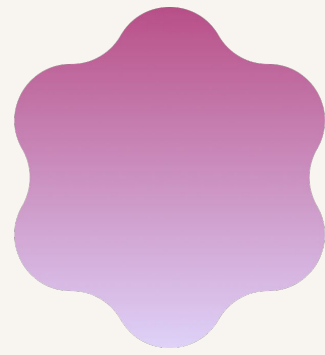


Section 01

Why and how did we do this research?



Adapting to change



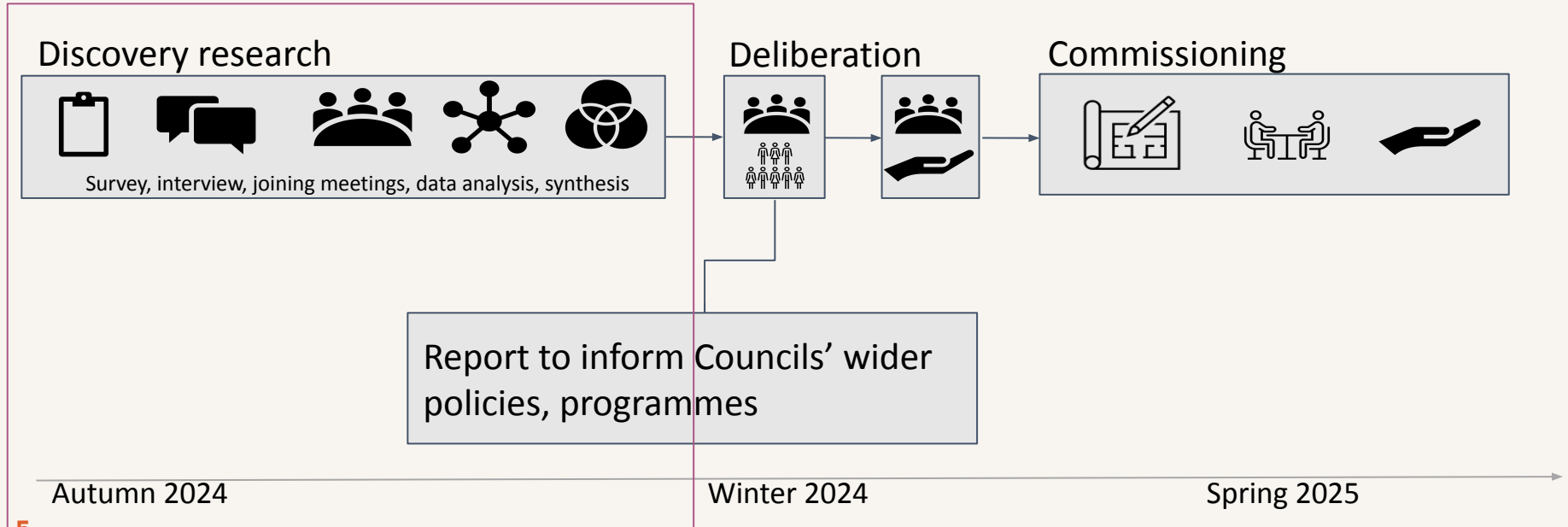
As 'councils for the community', Adur & Worthing Councils are renewing support for local community participation and enterprise for 2025-28. This renewal is taking place at a time of:

- financial challenge for both communities and councils.
- significant change to the councils' organisation and the operation of services, focused on working in more resilient, adaptive and participative ways with residents and communities in the neighbourhood.

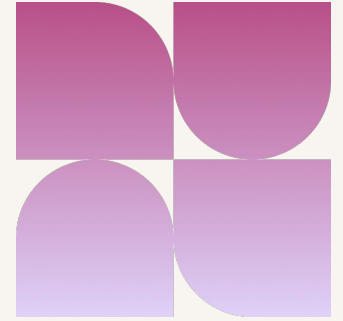
Before deciding where and how to focus resources for the future, the councils wanted to gather insights into current strengths in local community participation and enterprise and identify future possibilities.

Research for decision-making

Ideas Alliance worked with Adur & Worthing Councils to design a participatory process for the discovery research and the deliberative events that followed. The research intended to inform decision-making about what and who to commission to support and enable inclusive and resilient community participation and enterprise 2025-2028.



Discovery research



“How do the councils support and enable
inclusive and resilient community participation?”

The question guiding the discovery research phase



Who we learned from

Adur & Worthing Councils were interested to learn from those groups, organisations and social enterprises they don't have relationships with, either directly or through the current infrastructure provider Community Works. To build our sample list, we considered three main characteristics:



Places - we wanted to hear from people from different places in Adur and Worthing, because local insights data explain the socio-economic and cultural differences between neighbourhoods.



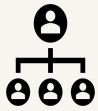
People - we wanted to explore how we experience initiating and running groups differently according to who we are, our personal histories, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, ages and genders.



Purpose - we wanted to hear from groups who set up for different reasons and motivations, including the environment, health, housing, cost of living, arts, heritage, young people, older age, education.

Who we learned from

We were also keen to learn from groups of different sizes and positions – from the mothers who set up a book nook in their neighbourhood to established charities and grant-making organisations. We sought contact with residents associations and informal groups using community centres for events.



Organisations – we invited established charities working with Adur and Worthing, parish councils as well as cultural and health partners including museums, libraries, NHS and citizen advice.



Community groups – we reached out to residents associations, community hubs, scouts associations, women’s hubs, local clubs, choirs, sports clubs, foodbanks, carers support groups, warm spaces, youth groups, parent groups veterans and anti-racist movements.



Support infrastructure – we interviewed staff members of current support infrastructure services in Adur and Worthing.

A survey of stories and inspiration

We sent out circa 400 invitations to complete a survey that asked people to share their stories of working for positive change. We advertised on social media and also left paper copies in libraries and community centres.

- We received 93 responses (76 digital and 17 paper)
- We collected 149 stories of organisations and groups:
 - involving and including people
 - surviving or thriving in the face of challenge
- We collected over 200 wishes for the future
- Sources of inspiration

people 'all of the time'

"RECENTLY WE DECIDED TO FUNDRAISE FOR THE BLUE FIN WARD AT WORTHING HOSPITAL - THAT PLAYS A MASSIVE PART IN OUR LITTLE ONE'S PRESCHOOL JOURNEY"

"Selfless acts of kindness"

"PLASTIC FREE, MCS, SAS, KEEP BRITAIN TIDY, FINAL STRAW" (a surfer against sewage!)

"Looking at other artistic communities"

"JANICE MOTH TACKLING LONELINESS WITH THE GLAMOUR CLUB EVENTS."

"Paul Brewer's leadership on Sussex Bay and radical collaboration has been really inspirational."

"I HAVE BEEN VERY INSPIRED BY COMMUNITY WORKS WHO ARE CONSISTENTLY FINDING WAYS TO BRING ORGANISATIONS TOGETHER, LISTENING TO THEIR MEMBERS AND THE COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE COMMUNICATING OPPORTUNITIES AND PROMOTING COLLABORATION."

"I AM INSPIRED BY GAY JACKLIN OF WORTHING 4 REFUGEES AND JESS ESTCOURT OF COMMUNITY WORKS"

A series of conversations



We spent 15 hours talking with infrastructure organisations, council officers and the Chief Executive of Adur & Worthing councils. We had informal chats with people involved in running charities and community centres. We took part in an event run by Community Works – The Children and Young People Autumn Network – to learn with organisations.

- We identified key patterns and trends experienced by those working for positive change in their communities.
- We identified key opportunities to strengthen support to involve and include people and survive and thrive into the future





Participatory analysis

Young people along with staff and volunteers from Esteem, Friends of Marine Gardens, Findon Valley Residents Association, Worthing Soup Kitchen and Council Officers gathered to interpret the stories and wishes to:

- Group commonalities and differences in the stories into themes
- Identify quotes that capture the essence of a theme



“This is my territory really”

“This is my experience”

“That theme is really clear”

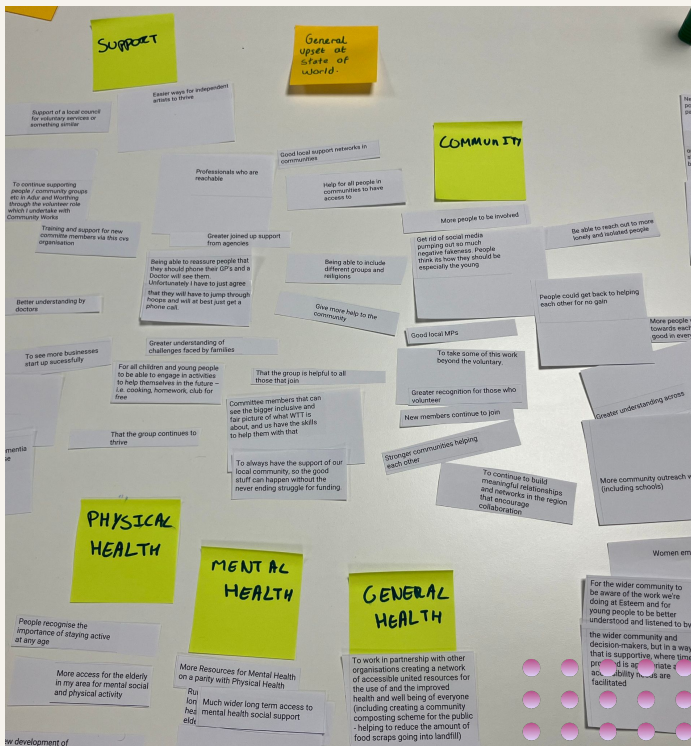
A collection of reflections by the group analysing the data – illustrating the power of having people who do the work analyse data about community participation and enterprise

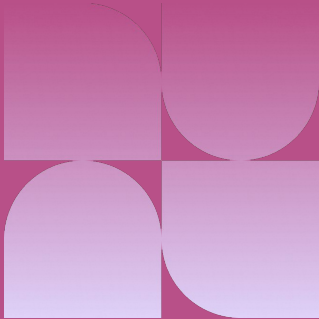
Synthesis

Insights from analysis were formed into bigger stories by weaving together the findings from different sources of evidence. The aim of the synthesis was to understand the strengths of community participation locally and possibilities for the future.

The data tells twelve bigger stories, including:

- five stories about involving and including people
- six stories about surviving and thriving
- one story about the health impacts of participation

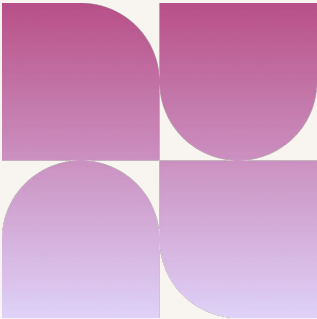




Section 02

What did we learn?





Five stories about involving and including people



1. Dimensions of inclusion

We used a broad definition of inclusion in this work to mean “including and involving people”. In the earliest conversations it became possible to see there are different ways of understanding inclusion.

- For some community groups, voluntary organisations and social enterprises inclusion is about diversifying who gives and receives support.
- For groups established to provide peer support, spaces that can heal and opportunities to reconnect with culture are important.
- Identity-specific groups or “embassies” allow individuals with shared experiences to have a safe space in which to explore their realities and the social, cultural and political relationships which surround them.

“Minoritised groups have a fear of institutions. Refugees for example may have issues with visas and worry about the status of their children” Interview

“This is a self-help group. The group is only for people who have Parkinson’s”
Survey respondent

1. Dimensions of inclusion cont ...

The research points to inclusion as an intentional act. It doesn't happen by accident. Groups have to be intentional about it and work in new ways to achieve it. Sometimes they make the deliberate choice not to do it.

- The stories pointed to using different participatory methodologies and anti-racist practices, sharing food, subsidised trips to the theatre) were used to bring people together.
- Other groups admitted the extra work involvices.
- Social occasions (e.g., festivals, gatherings)
- Places where people don't have the same sort of home and the same sort of job makes inclusion more difficult, as solidarity is harder to create.

“We need to earn the right to speak vs keep speaking ... Sundays we are very multinational now. Almost everyone has English as a second language” Interview

“We have become very selfish. Including people involves paperwork, courses and a lot of fluff” Survey respondent

“I resisted attempts by certain residents to be “high-brow”
Survey respondent



“Being able to include different groups and religions.”

A wish from a survey respondent

“Support for organisations to enable volunteers from diverse backgrounds to join their team”

A wish from a survey respondent

Left: A drawing by a group taking part in 25th November deliberative event. It describes what a future of community participation could look like 2025-2028

2. The value of safe, social spaces

Community spaces are key to involving quieter parts of the community and encouraging people to step outside of their bubble.

- These spaces are often social offering “all sorts of creature comforts” (survey respondent). They include food, music, the arts, physical activity and people who really listen.
- Central spaces to publicise events and provide shelter are important as well as venues and facilities close to where people live.
- Community centres were celebrated as well as the indoor and outdoor spaces people and groups could make their own, especially young people.
- “Developing spaces is a slow process, but we saw that by doing it bit by bit ... allows the building to grow with its community” (Community Works report on Spaces).

“When you have a specific place to go, you belong”

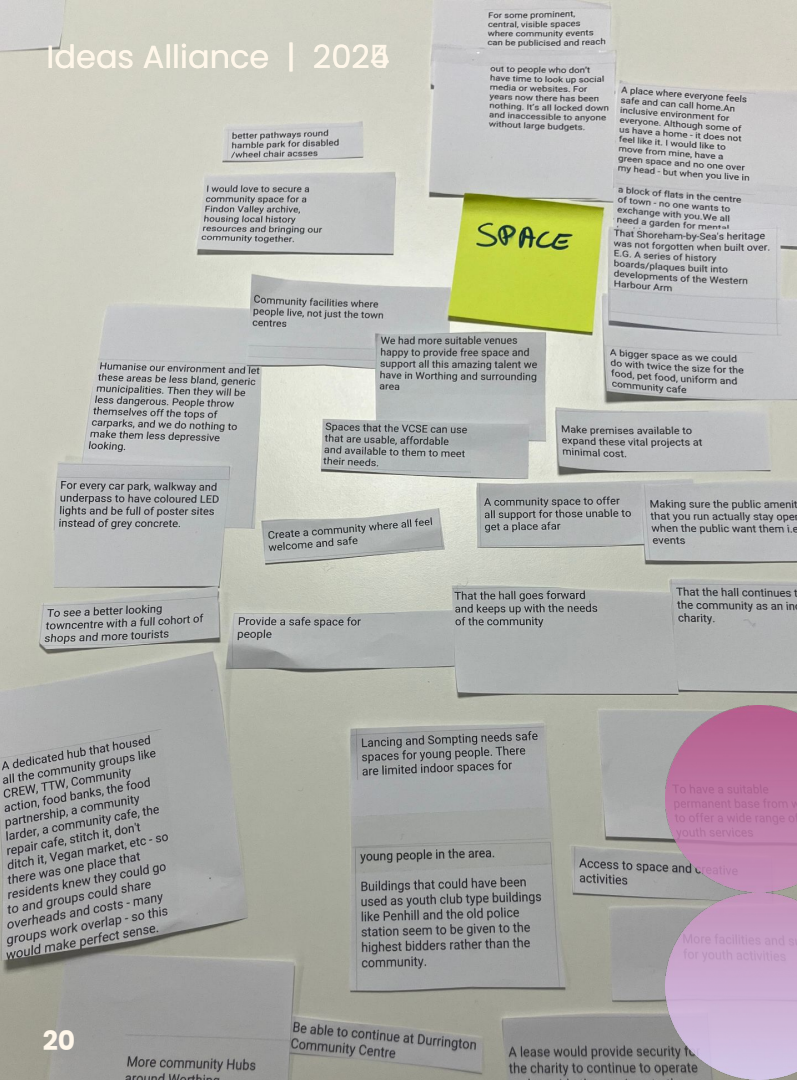
Reflection by community analyst

“As I arrived at the community centre there was a person sleeping outside. I was able to talk to them and give them a coffee”

Survey respondent

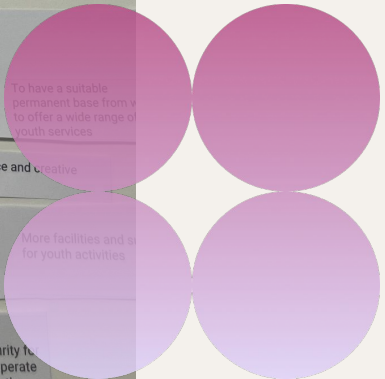
“We lack affordable community buildings”

Survey respondent



“A place where everyone feels safe and can call home. An inclusive environment for everyone. Although some of us have a home it does not feel like it. I would like to move from mine, have a green space and no-one over my head. We all need a garden for mental health and wellbeing”

Survey respondent sharing a wish for the future



3. Moving at the speed of trust

There is strong consensus that community groups, organisations, social enterprises and support organisations are inclusive when they “move at the speed of trust”.

- Trust is important in places where there isn't time to invest in community, nor a sense of solidarity because people are experiencing poverty or living in areas of high economic diversity. Relationship building is also important in places where community action and activism have become politicised.
- It takes a lot of energy to work relationally and responsively with communities.
- Local visibility is important for trust building. When the wider system (e.g., funders, councils, elected members, statutory organisations) understands the value of groups being locally embedded it is easier for community participation to thrive.

“Just taking part in ‘on street’ discussions and connecting with people face to face helps us to connect with a wider selection of people than we may come across at our usual farmers market stall or on line” Survey respondent

“Having people in a place to help is a real bonus” Interview



“Relationships are the most important thing. When I started, I wore my black trousers and shirt and I looked like the council and people weren’t interested. I always thought it was my job to break this down. But I realise it is on me to put more effort into thinking about how I am perceived” Interview

4. Adapting for diversity

The research learned that awareness is building about the importance of adapting to diverse lived experiences.

- Youth groups are working with societal advancements to adapt approaches and methodologies of participation that work with LGBTQ+ and neurologically diverse people.
- Practice-based knowledge on how to be LGBTQ+ friendly or anti-racists isn't easily available to community and voluntary groups working in other concerns - e.g., environment, health, heritage.
- Much of the work to adapt for diversity is internal (within individuals) and cultural (within organisations).

“Sharing examples of good anti-racist practice is a useful way to hold one another to account”

Survey respondent

“The importance of robust dialogue about serious matters excites me. Experts can overlook issues obvious to lay people”

Survey respondent

5. Adoption of digital tools

People's relationship with digital tools is not straightforward. Some digital tools save time and include more people. Other digital processes increase workload and remove the human and relational aspects of community building.

- Some tools (e.g., creation of mailing lists) have reduced the amount of time people spend running organisations.
- The use of digital technology to apply for funding and onboard volunteers has increased the work of infrastructure organisations who need to provide allyship, technical know-how and encouragement to persevere. It has not reduced face-to-face contact.
- There is a sense that voluntary and community organisations have a very human face and people volunteer time because they want to practically do things; not spend time on computers.

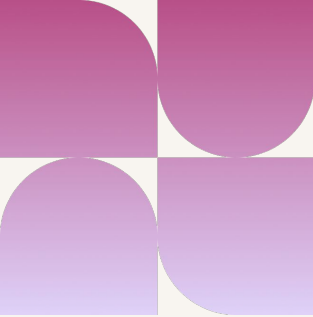
“When we started 12 years ago our grants programme was on paper, and when we went online we lost a lot of applications from the smaller groups” Interview

“The cross-over between digital and the repair café to spark local action is really interesting” Interview

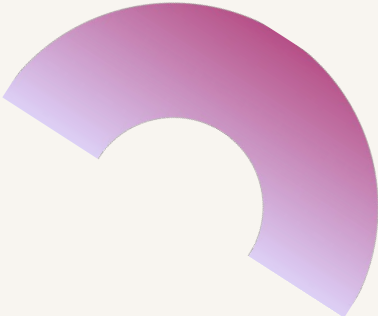


“Following a conversation with another Arts Forum attendee I realised that we had a reputation that was a barrier to people coming along, learning a little more about photography and having fun. From that conversation the Smartphone challenge was born... It supports the NHS 5 steps to mental health and wellbeing and is very democratising”

Survey respondent



Six stories about surviving and thriving



6. The challenge to keep going

Groups and organisations are hugely grateful for the support they have received to set themselves up and there were wishes for more support that would enable them to keep going.

- Many people are tired and burnt out. They are 15–20 years older than when they set up. They wish to resign or hand over the reigns but are struggling to find leaders, committee members and trustees to continue the organisation’s mission. Practical support with succession planning was identified as one opportunity.
- People frequently wished for support from professional services – fundraising, marketing, legal, first aid, experienced conservationists, good speakers.
- Volunteers are central to so much of what organisations are able to achieve. Attracting and finding volunteers and members “to have more hands on deck” is a challenge.

“We are existing on borrowed time due to the advancing ages of the six regular members” Survey

“It’s like a second job we don’t get paid for. Even though we do it for arts and music in the community, we are all quite burnt out with the workload” Survey

7. An unfriendly operating context

There was a sense that the intentions and value created by voluntary and community groups were not always appreciated and supported by the councils. There were many examples of social action being hampered, and these insights create opportunities to remove institutional barriers:

- **Reducing unnecessary costs of operation** - venue hire, security costs, parking costs, business rate exemption costs, cost of bins, cost of planning permission, costs of insurance.
- **Reduce uncertainty** - insecure leases that haven't been rearranged sap energy, time and resources. The need for charities with premises to apply for exemption from business rates every two years raises stress levels.
- **Greater understanding** - of the challenges faced by families, young people, dads, volunteers, informal groups in the way services, support and grants are designed.

“The hoops when you have a ‘live’ situation”

Reflection by community analyst

“THE COUNCIL EVEN CHARGED US FOR THE BIG BINS for our fun day for the community” Survey respondent

“We can't get permits so we get parking fines picking up unused food from shop.” Interview



“A more joined-up working from local authority departments (which we are now seeing and is great) where community priorities are at the centre of decision-making and the voluntary sector voices are included and listened to”

Survey respondent

8. Formalisation of community work

While stories acknowledge the importance of policies and governance structures to make volunteering safe for volunteers, it is not where people's energy is, nor their expertise.

- Increasing formalisation of processes (e.g., setting up an organisation, policy development, volunteer training) is requiring that infrastructure organisations spend more time encouraging citizens to start something up or volunteer. Their role is to “demystify” and “humanise.”
- As community participation and enterprise formalises, the importance of continual access to professional knowledge also increases – “*deep* knowledge on HR, volunteers and the law, appropriate legal entities.”
- There are also calls for simplification, less bureaucracy, fewer donations spent on things not needed, less time spent in meetings and more ‘doing with people’.

“For things to be kept more simple rather than making a ‘professionalised’ industry out of every challenge” Survey respondent

“My third wish is for licensing authorities to recognise that community events happening in licensed venues can be safe without professional security because community events can police themselves”
Survey respondent

9. Funding and the gift economy

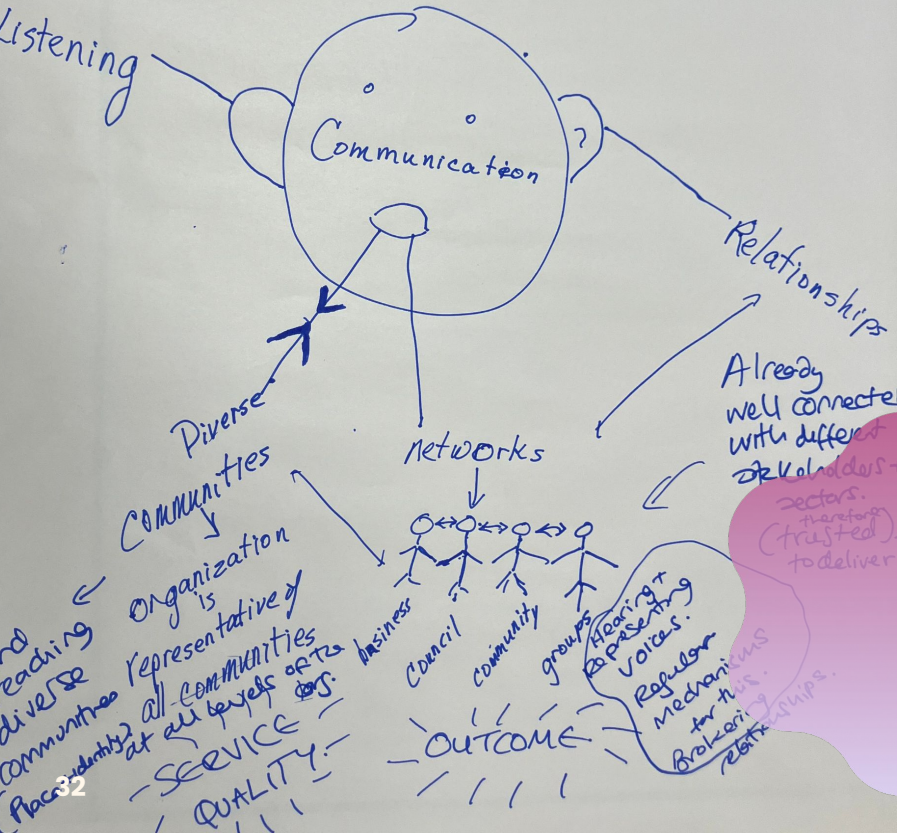
Community groups and those who support them run very lean operations. The challenge to resource efforts is a consistent theme - “ambition always outstrips resources” and local groups responding to need find it difficult to fundraise because “we are not one thing”. A few things would help:

- More and longer-term funding so groups are not repeatedly doing grant applications for projects.
- Having access to affordable things to do with people - art, music events, swimming pool, pantomime. There were examples of groups like the scouts heavily subsidising activities to expand and extend reach of groups.
- Working with the councils to reduce unnecessary costs of operation and forming partnerships to reduce running costs - e.g., advertising, cost waivers for events.

“Relationships save money”
Interview

“We had to pay for insurance, use of space etc, when effectively we were a small group with a gazebo on the green ... it would be helpful to have a threshold to reduce cost barriers for groups that have developed organically and do not have funding”

Survey respondent



“Many charities are competing for the same resources – if there could be more consideration into how resources are shared locally it may support communities better”

Survey respondent

Left: A drawing by a group taking part in 25th November deliberative event. It describes what a future for community participation could look like 2025-2028

9. Funding and the gift economy cont ...

There were lots of examples where groups were innovating different models of funding and exchange of resources.

- Exchanging gardening for venue hire
- Creation of wills that allow people to give back to places they have lived in and enjoyed
- Raising donations direct from citizens
- Linking social action – e.g., food growing and food banks, digital and repair cafes
- The linking of arts, businesses and venues to provide free theatre on the First Worthing Theatre Trail
- Funding for informal community groups and individuals

“To create other gardens based on this model where local people from the community can get involved in growing food from scratch and contributing to food banks”

A wish of a survey respondent



“The VCSE is finding that they are working with more and more complex cases and they are having to hold service users for longer due to lack of resources from statutory organisations”

Survey respondent

“Each year we are unable to support around 15-20% families referred to us”

Survey respondent

10. Rising unmet mental health needs

There was consensus that mental health needs are on the rise and mental health problems can limit the statutory services people can access. It is here where voluntary and community groups step in.

- There is a particular concern for young people, who face 3 year wait times with CAMHS and lack affordable things to do / places to be, especially in Lancing, Sompting, Fishersgate and Durrington.
- Sociable hobbies like sports, music and the arts improve people's wellbeing, young and old, and serve people who are lonely and isolated. These opportunities for social interactions in community are particularly important for groups - young, elderly and with disability "unable to get to a place afar".

"While I can help if it is something I can look up on the internet, they [people] are often lost - either physically or mentally and I don't know how to help them."

Survey respondent

"At first [when doing voluntary piano playing] I used to take a sandwich bur was then invited to have lunch. I am delighted to have a meal cooked for me!"

Survey respondent

11. The power of collaboration

Local knowledge was consistently recognised as a strength to build from. Stories frequently identified the engagement of professional expertise and specialist skills as a turning point, including help from council officers, elected members, businesses etc.

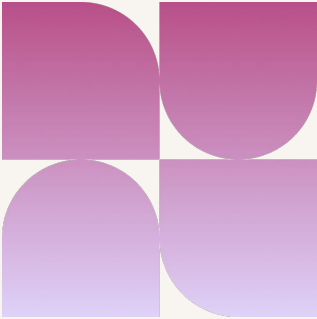
- Requests for partnerships between local organisations, between residents associations, between the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector and business, between the sector and council officers, between the sector and councillors.
- There is no known space to advertise needs and offers for collaboration and partnership, so organisations grow from sharing skills and best practice.
- There are opportunities for infrastructure support organisations to learn more from one another - e.g., funders working with one another.

“We would love to partner again with a group (s) leading on social, community cooking and eating”

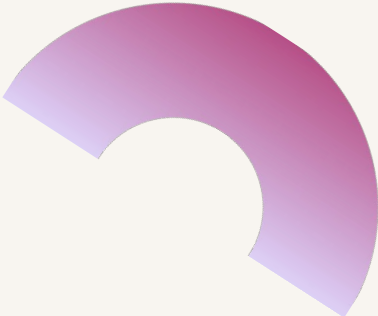
Survey respondent

“One of the ways that I see everything come together for VCSEs is when I meet with community centres”

Survey respondent



One story about
the health impacts of community participation
and social enterprise



12. Health impacts of community work

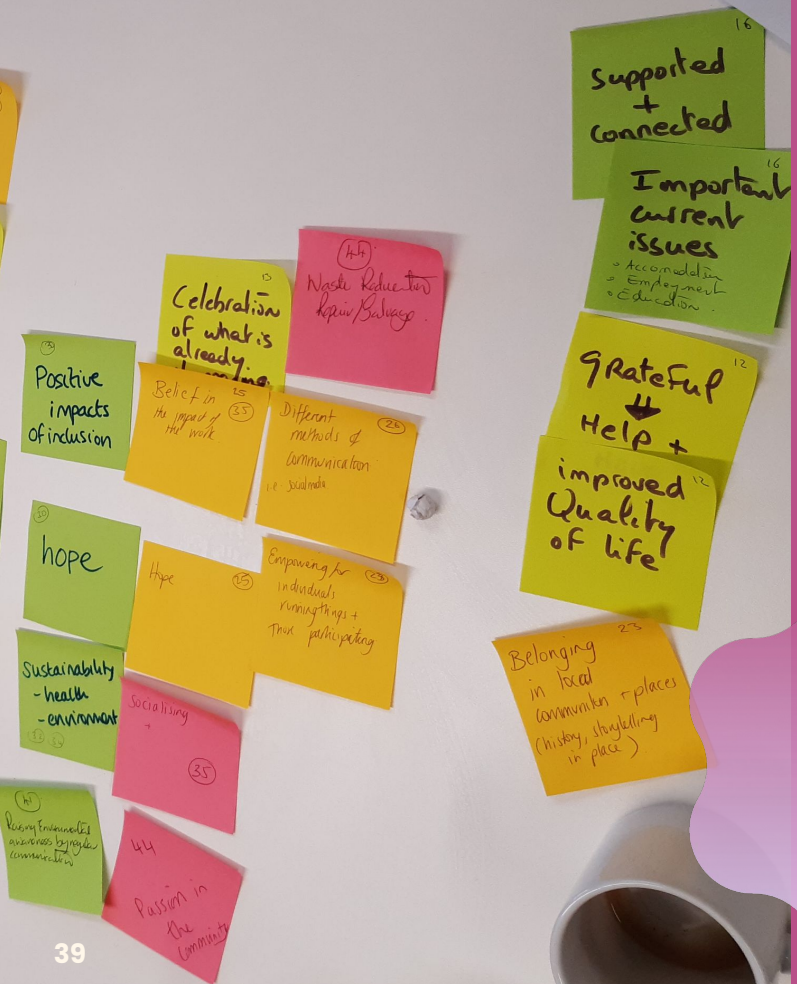
Nearly every impact recorded in the stories could be aligned with public health outcomes – directly improving physical and mental health as well as improving the wider environmental and community determinants of health.

- Outcomes include hope, joy and a sense of belonging.
- When people interact with community groups and charities they often feel seen, heard and cared for. This “warmth” and responsiveness is a qualitatively different experience than being put on a waiting list by a statutory service.
- Survey respondents saw opportunities for statutory bodies to recognise and intentionally fund community participation and social enterprise as part of their mental health and public health investments – especially to create the spaces and places where people connect with their neighbours to come up with their own solutions.

“It’s amazing to see someone leave looking empowered and ready for the day” Survey respondent

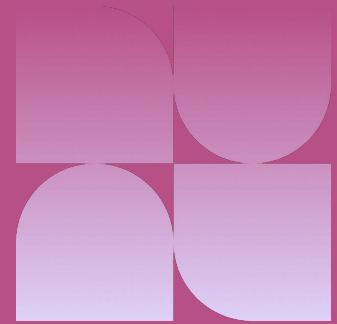
“I offer free exercise classes for the community of Lancing ... to keep people moving with all different abilities” Survey respondent

“Where people can connect with their neighbours and the infrastructure is pro-social” Survey respondent



I honestly feel that if it wasn't for the Group, myself and all the other mums would slip into a much darker place. The staff and volunteers are pure light and full of kindness."

Survey respondent



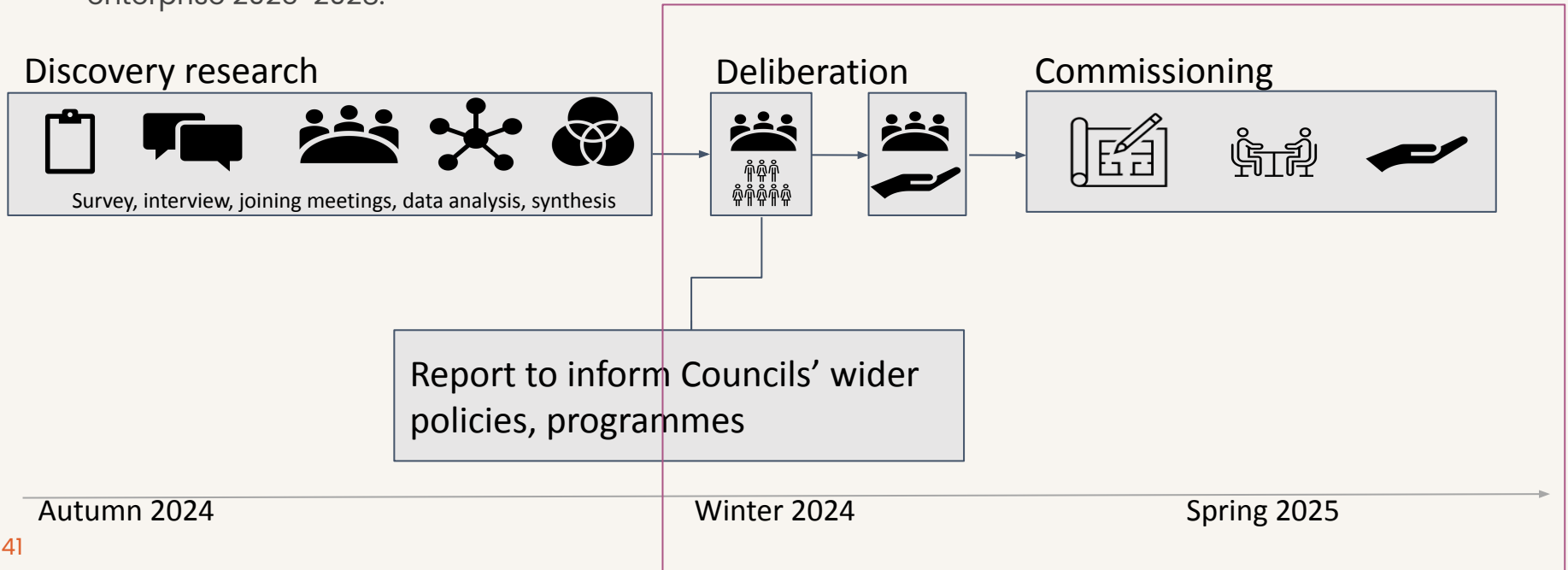
Section 03

How can we use this research?

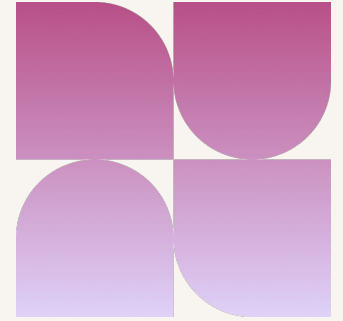


Research for decision-making

Ideas Alliance worked with Adur & Worthing Councils to design a participatory process to the discovery research and the deliberative events that followed. The research intended to inform decision-making about what and who to commission to support inclusive and resilient community participation and enterprise 2025-2028.



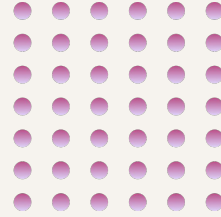
Deliberation



“What are the **outcomes and qualities of approach** we are seeking for the future of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector?”

The question guiding the deliberative phase

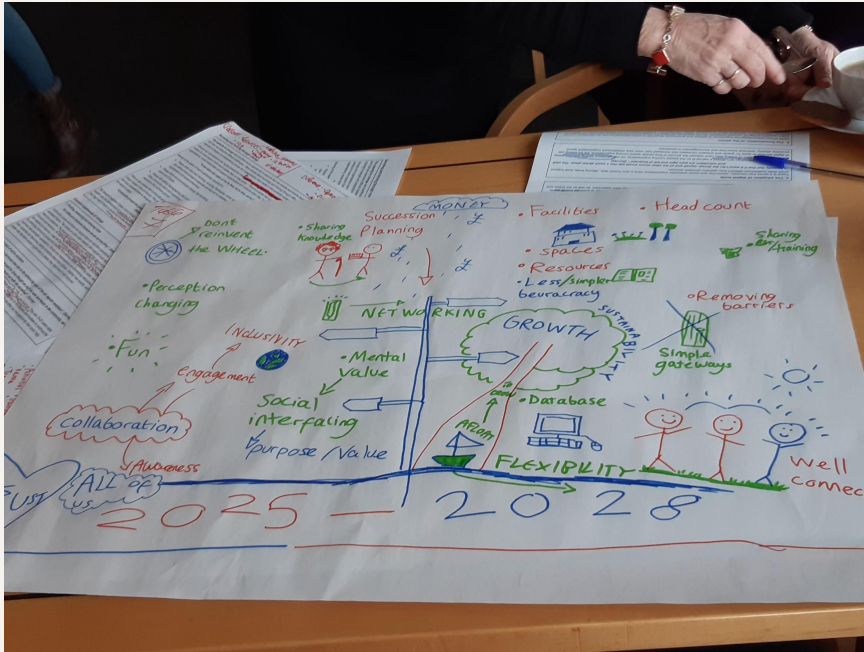


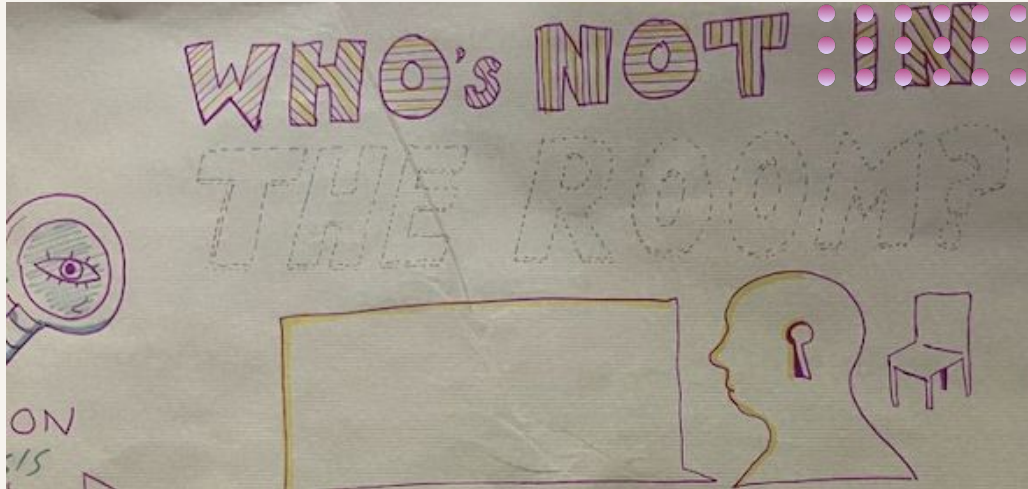


Deliberation to identify priorities

On 25th November, 45 people gathered to review evidence on the changes currently experienced by people working community participation and social enterprise.

The focus was to identify outcomes and qualities to inform the commissioning of infrastructure support 2025–2028.





Deliberation to identify potential

On 4th December, 11 organisations gathered to explore how a partnership could help achieve impactful and high quality support for community participation and social enterprise through 2025-2028.

There was a focus on innovation and approach to co-evolve different models of infrastructure support, especially in the first year of the partnership.



ADUR & WORTHING
COUNCILS

IDEAS
ALLIANCE

Outcomes for commissioning

On 25th November 2024 40+ people working for positive change in their communities came together to review early findings from the discovery research and explore the outcomes any partnership to provide infrastructure support should focus on.

Outcomes: what are we seeking to achieve?

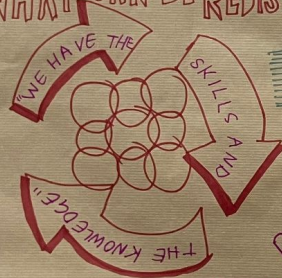
- Timely, accessible, practical support that's tangible and measurable
- Enabling action to free capacity
- Well-connected at all levels for sustainable growth
- An ecosystem
- Building networks / relationships between businesses, councils, communities and other groups
- Joined up understanding and support to create a better coordinated response to local need
- Supporting succession planning and future proofing
- Regular connection with council officers and councillors
- Diverse communities by place and identity

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

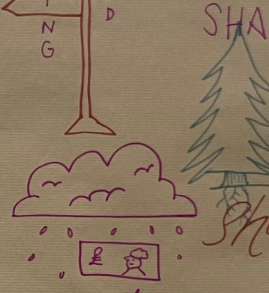
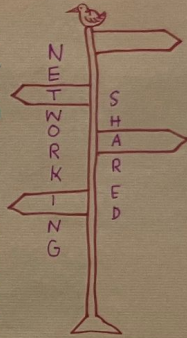
DRAWING IT OUT:



WHAT CAN BE REDISTRIBUTED?



STANDARD



LOCAL ACTION HUBS



2025 → 2028

LISTEN!
please.

Qualities for commissioning

On 25th November 40+ people working in community participation and social enterprise came together to review early findings from the discovery research and explore the qualities any partnership to provide infrastructure support should embody.

Qualities: how are we going to go about achieving the outcomes?

- Co-production
- Psychological safety
- Volunteering and participation
- Local experience and local connections
- Moving away from a service central model to distributed / de-centralised design
- Place-based / hyperlocal / accessible
- Accessibility and visibility (service and individual level)
- Removing barriers and less bureaucracy

Innovation and approach

On 4th December, Adur & Worthing Councils' officers and 11 organisations discussed some of the evidence presented above to explore what future infrastructure support could look like. These key principles about innovation and approach emerged. Some of the experimentations to realise these principles are listed:

Rooting support infrastructure in people and places – build from what's working, building from where missing, use community listening, community conversations, community research and coaching to connect communities through the care, creativity and energy they share. Co-produce solutions and build collective power to take action. Place-based enterprise.

Relationships being the engine of change – social interactions that build trust underpin volunteering and social action. Match-make skills, expertise and common challenges. Build an ecosystem where the VCSE is an equal partner. Engage business as part of community, link into political structures (councillors), anchor institutions (the NHS, the port), Sussex-wide funding opportunities and statutory bodies (councils) to remove barriers and bureaucracy from social action.

Innovation and approach cont ...

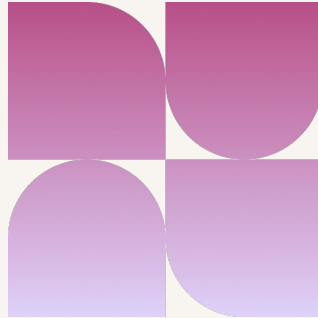
Practical action – shift from thinking to action. Learn through doing. Test, experiment, fail fast and test again. Experiment with digital and AI to make it easier to take social action. Experiment with removing barriers. Make it easy to keep listening and remain accountable to people and places.

Protecting – pay attention to what needs protecting for future strengthening of community participation and social enterprise – especially, the role of volunteers and their experience of burnout; existing assets and their transfer; the important tension between focusing on places and the provision of borough and district-wide support.

Opportunities for the Councils

Focusing - a need to focus a partnership on what's achievable within budget for current contract renewal. Looking at what to protect as well as what to promote

Unlocking - a commitment to use council levers to unlock / overcome barriers cited in this research and those that emerge through testing and stress testing innovations and approaches



Funding - a commitment to experiment with how to leverage social value in Adur & Worthing procurement and commissioning to support VCSE in Year 1

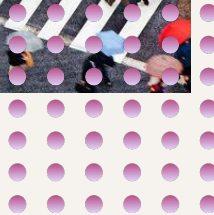
Co-evolving - the Councils internal restructuring into neighbourhood teams can form an important element of a partnership to support voluntary, community and social enterprises in Adur and Worthing

How you can use this research



Our hope is that this report can be a useful to a range of local people and groups.

- **Funding your projects:** please do use the information in this report to support any funding applications. You can use the report to show how your work is responding to local need or
- **Designing your own project:** please feel free to use the research for your own community action to check it is aligned with place-based evidence and robust deliberation.



Scope and limitations of this work



- For the discovery research we invested in the sampling stage, finding another 100 organisations to reach out to as well as establishing relationships with research partners and councillors to use email lists, networks, What'sApp groups, and Facebook groups to broaden our connections. This led to a strong response rate and a large collection of community stories.
- The paper surveys took a lot of work, but they helped us hear from older people and through people using community centres in Durrington, Fishersgate and East Worthing specifically. This enriched our perspective, geographically but also culturally, as we started to learn about different groups using the centres for different religious and cultural ceremonies.
- We didn't establish the connections with diverse enough array of religious, cultural and ethnic groups. Although we used the relationships we had, there are too few strong connections between officers and councillors into these groups. The project would have required a longer time frame and more resources to move at the speed of trust to broker engagement of people currently "invisible" to the Councils.
- The project would have benefited from a cross-cultural understandings of inclusion, resilience and community action. It would have gained from learning about different models of mobilising and resourcing citizen action that diaspora communities bring to Adur and Worthing.

Ideas Alliance are a social enterprise that wants public services to work in equal partnership with local people

February 2025

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