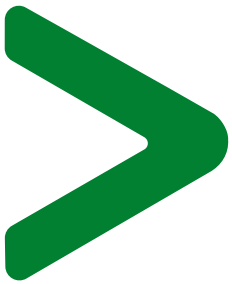




Growing Spaces:

Community hubs and their role in recovery



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Foreword

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We've seen many studies over recent years lamenting the loss of community spirit, often harking back through somewhat rose-tinted spectacles to a time when more of us knew our neighbours, were more likely to depend on those around us and enjoyed a regular cycle of community events and celebrations.

While there is clearly some truth in the analysis that society in general has become more atomised, families more dispersed and that cars and commuting have weakened our attachment to the neighbourhoods in which we live, this is not the case for all people in all places. It is also clear that, in times of crisis, we realise how important these bonds and connections are.

The experience of the Covid-19 crisis and the associated upsurge in mutual aid and community volunteering has reminded us of our inter-dependence and the lockdown has led us to connect with – and realise the value of – the places and spaces that surround us.

Some of these will be temporary effects, which will fade as the pandemic slowly subsides, but some will be permanent shifts. The social inequalities exposed by the virus will lead us to reappraise how we promote health, provide care and broaden access to the natural environment. A change in working habits will mean more of us will spend more time at home with potentially positive consequences for how we connect with our neighbours.

Having places that can provide a setting for these activities and connections is hugely important, doubly so in areas where people are less mobile, families struggle to afford paid for leisure opportunities

and where there is tension between groups of different ages or backgrounds.

The community hubs explored in this report pre-existed the coronavirus crisis but the lessons they provide should help us understand how to help the communities hardest hit get back on their feet. They also provide important pointers for how we might use the experience as a springboard for sustained voluntary action that improves the quality of life in our local areas now while building the resilience we will need to cope with future emergencies.



CHANGING PLACES CHANGING LIVES



Executive summary

There is a growing body of evidence which points to the importance of 'social infrastructure' in making neighbourhoods good places to live, in providing the networks and services that keep people well and in helping communities cope with adversity. This social infrastructure has come to the fore during the Covid-19 crisis, with an upsurge in volunteering and 'mutual aid', and many community buildings and open spaces repurposed as part of the emergency response. The experience has led many to consider how this infrastructure might be more effectively sustained as part of the recovery, embedded more fully in our approach to longer-term place-making, and used as a platform for community-led solutions to the twin crises of social care and climate change.

Looking in detail at three examples, this report argues that 'community hubs' – places that provide a focus for a range of practical volunteering - can provide a strong base for addressing some of the issues facing people living in 'left behind' communities. They are both an integral part of social infrastructure and support its wider development, promoting social cohesion, building trust and interaction between community members, and increasing people's knowledge, skills, and wider networks. Making green space a central component of community hubs can improve both mental and physical health and stimulate a greater appetite for action on climate change and biodiversity loss.

Although the three community hubs studies in this report have much in common, each is unique – in both character and the activities that take place there, reflecting the bottom-up approach taken to developing each one. Despite their individuality, the hubs have a series of recognisable – and replicable – features and all deliver broadly similar outcomes in terms of social and environmental impact:

- They are all fundamentally social spaces that help people to broaden their networks and foster a sense of belonging
- The contribution of every individual is valued equally, no matter their starting point
- They can act as stepping stones, helping people into employment or back into education
- People who spend time at the hubs report a significant impact on their health and wellbeing
- They bring together people from different walks of life, fostering greater community cohesion
- The skills and knowledge of dedicated staff play a crucial role in enabling community life in and around the hub
- The hubs help to improve the local environment on the sites themselves, promote connection to nature and horticultural skills, 'green' the local area, and can play a role in raising awareness of climate change and biodiversity loss

Groundwork's experience of managing these hubs - and many others - has led to considerable learning about the preconditions for success. There is no single blueprint for ensuring hubs can survive in the long term, but there are ways of working which can maximise their impact and their sustainability as follows:

- Most community hubs rely on mixed funding models to support their activities and a 'critical mass' of overlapping service delivery is important in achieving a base level of stability
- It is a fundamental pre-requisite that community hubs are community-led, with professional support and facilitation providing a platform
- for resident-led decision making and voluntary community action
- Community hubs can play a crucial role in supporting vulnerable residents and this requires access to specialist resources. It is important to ensure that hubs build community resilience rather than create dependency

If we are serious about a green recovery from Covid-19, investment in this type of social and environmental infrastructure must be recognised as having equal importance to 'grey infrastructure'. These hubs can become a focal point for rebuilding social connections and reversing the isolation that many people have experienced during lockdown.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made the extent of health inequalities in the UK much more visible, with many of the most disadvantaged households and communities hardest hit. While community hubs will never be a panacea, they offer one model for a future of more active and empowered communities with a greater understanding of the social and economic benefits that can be gained from a healthy environment.

Introduction

There is a growing body of evidence and experience which points to the importance of 'social infrastructure' in making neighbourhoods good places to live, in providing the networks and services that keep people well and in helping communities cope with adversity. This social infrastructure – "the networks of spaces, facilities, institutions, and groups that create affordances for social connection"¹ – has come to the fore during the Covid-19 crisis, with an upsurge in community volunteering and 'mutual aid'. Many community buildings and open spaces have been repurposed as part of the emergency response. The experience has led many to consider how this infrastructure might be more effectively sustained as part of the recovery, embedded more fully in our approach to longer-term place-making, and used as a platform for community-led solutions to the twin crises of social care and climate change.

For nearly four decades, Groundwork has been working with local people to create and manage 'community hubs' as a means of building capacity and resilience in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and as a setting for a wide range of interventions aimed at improving the prospects of those who are most vulnerable. Our experience is that when these

hubs are appropriately staffed and resourced, they can have a transformative effect on people's lives, as well as helping neighbours to take collective action to improve their area and tackle the issues that affect them.

There is ample evidence to demonstrate that, despite the growth happening in our core cities, there are neighbourhoods, communities and whole towns across the UK that are not benefiting from this investment and where people feel at risk of being 'left behind' in an increasingly globalised economy. These areas have also been hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis – in terms of death rates but particularly the economic consequences of the pandemic.²

Given the high concentrations of deprivation they may be susceptible to further localised lockdowns.

Many of these same communities are also at risk of being 'left behind' in the transition to net zero carbon emissions due to the higher cost attached to some greener choices, for example electric cars, green energy tariffs, and organic food. In many cases they are precisely the places most at risk from the negative effects of climate change such as extreme weather, poor air quality and loss of jobs in high

carbon industries. This inequity is also apparent in the quality of local environments and people's connection to nature. People living in more disadvantaged areas have less access to good quality greenspace close to where they live³ and visit the countryside less often.⁴

Mapping has shown that there is a concentration of 'left behind' areas – lacking in places to meet, active and engaged communities, and connectivity to the wider economy – in post-industrial towns in northern England and in coastal areas of southern England. Many communities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland share similar characteristics, with higher rates of unemployment, ill health and child poverty than other similarly deprived areas.⁵ It should be noted that many of these same areas have been the most significant beneficiaries of EU Structural Funds, to which the UK will lose access when the transition period ends, with the Government yet to decide how to replace them with a promised UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The work of Professor Michael Marmot highlights a strong correlation between these factors and health inequalities, with life expectancy actually lower than it was ten years ago for some people living in our most disadvantaged areas.⁶

Places which have been ‘left behind’ by global economic forces and which are most exposed to the impact of a changing climate would benefit most from a strong social infrastructure to provide both a safety net for people living in poverty and the stimulus for new forms of local economic activity. However, levels of social capacity and volunteering are lower in these places,⁷ often due to communities being more transient and many people struggling with more immediate material concerns.

In many of the country’s most disadvantaged areas, there are fewer than average charities relative to the population; for example, there are only 0.6 charities for every 1,000 people in Blackpool (Blackpool local authority district ranks number one in the 2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation), lower than both the regional average of 1.4 per 1,000 and the national average of 1.8 per 1,000.⁸ This matters because the activities of charities and other civil

society organisations can help to create social capital and a bridge between individuals and local government or other institutions.

Groundwork’s research on the experiences of community groups found that around half feel that taking action in their local area has become more difficult over the past five and ten years, despite most respondents agreeing that there is now more need for community-led action on social and environmental issues.⁹ In many cases this is explained by a reduction in public spending (which has been more acute in local authority areas with greater levels of disadvantage),¹⁰ which has increased the need for services but reduced the funding available to meet that need. While accessing funding is a key concern for these groups, they also identify a range of non-financial forms of support which would improve their capacity to affect change, including community engagement, recruiting and retaining volunteers, public relations and the use of

technology.¹¹

Community hubs can provide a strong base for addressing a number of these issues. They are both an integral part of social infrastructure and support its wider development, promoting social cohesion, building trust and interaction between community members, and increasing people’s knowledge, skills and wider social networks. The green space that is integral to Groundwork’s community hubs can also increase physical activity and healthy eating and stimulate a greater appetite for action on climate change and biodiversity loss among those using them.¹²

This report looks in detail at community hubs in three towns in England and the ways in which they allow communities to come together and build resilience, making neighbourhoods healthier, greener and more equal.

The hubs are:

- the Green Patch in Kettering, Northamptonshire;
- Grozone in Northwich, Cheshire;
- @TheGrange in Blackpool, Lancashire.

Each has been in existence for a number of years, and in each case Groundwork acts as a managing body, responsible for the land and buildings and playing a pro-active role in helping the local community gain maximum benefit from the services and activities delivered.

The lessons contained in the report also draw on Groundwork’s experience of running a number of other hubs providing similar functions and services across its UK-wide network.

To produce this report interviews were conducted with Groundwork staff involved in the management of the hubs and with residents and volunteers who contribute to community life in the local area.



What happens in community hubs?



Although the three community hubs have much in common, each is unique – in both character and the activities that take place there. This is a result of the bottom-up approach taken to developing each one, with the needs and priorities of the communities in which they are based at its core.

Connecting people to the local environment is a core theme in each of the three, and in many of the other hubs Groundwork manages. Grozone and the Green Patch are community gardens while @TheGrange has a community garden (Grow Blackpool) attached to a community building. Gardening and growing food are core activities but the events and services that are delivered go far beyond this: wellbeing and horticulture courses, toddlers' groups, school visits and after-school clubs, communal meals and much more. The indoor space @TheGrange is home to the local library, a community shop, a café, local services, and flexible space used by a wide range of community groups for events and activities.

Who uses community hubs?

Each of the community hubs included in this report is an inclusive space, open to everyone in the local area. People become involved in activities and volunteering through different routes, some formal and some informal.

Word of mouth plays an important part in bringing people into the hubs. Many dedicated volunteers had heard about them from friends or relatives and in turn told others, building trust in the local community. One volunteer at Grozone told us how three generations of her family had benefitted from using the garden:

“My son came, oh, about eight years ago because he was getting bullied. We live quite close and he used to come when we were open on a Saturday to get away from bullying down the street. And then he asked me to come and then he’s moved on and I’m still here! And also, my dad comes and he’s got onset of dementia

and everyone’s brilliant with him here. I’m usually here with him and he loves coming here but it’s just a little bit cold for him at the moment.”

Other people wander into the community hubs by chance and staff and volunteers make sure to provide a friendly greeting. Volunteers running the café at @TheGrange told us that everyone gets their first cup of tea for free as a way of breaking the ice and putting newcomers at ease. Some modes of referral are more targeted. Hubs provide a setting for social prescribing, with referrals coming from GPs, social services and other agencies working with vulnerable people. At Grozone, the Youth Justice Service also brings young people to fulfil the community service element of court orders.

Children and young people are key users of the community hubs, from toddlers attending activity sessions to school and college groups. Some of the hubs Groundwork manages include community facilities such

as shops or provide co-located services including youth work, GP surgeries and pharmacies. Many of the spaces are available for the local community to rent for activities such as fitness classes, support groups, parties and much more. All these uses bring more people through the doors and knit the spaces into the fabric of the community.

Of course, there are people living close to each of the spaces that are not yet engaged and there is more that could be done to reach out into these groups. People who work full time during the week are sometimes less engaged because of the times of some volunteer activities, for example. Volunteers spoke about their hopes of developing more activities for certain groups, such as teenagers or older people, and of extending opening times. These spaces are never ‘finished’, they are in a constant process of evolution led by community needs with the hope of bringing in more people and activities.



Community hubs and COVID-19

This report was planned and much of the research done before coronavirus forced the nation into lockdown. A core function of community hubs is to bring people together, so the pandemic has posed an existential challenge. During lockdown, the spaces have been forced to pause many of their usual activities. Some of the activities that took place in the spaces have moved online, with tips on growing vegetables shared on social media and youth work delivered through video calls. @TheGrange became a hub for Blackpool Council's community relief effort, while the Green Patch set up a Donations Tent so that local residents could continue to access donated food and other goods, growing kits and vegetable boxes in a safe and socially distanced way.

Even when people cannot come together physically, the social networks created by the community

hubs have an important role to play in community resilience. Friends made at the community hubs check in on each other and staff have been making sure that vulnerable people are accessing the support they need.

These spaces will have an important part to play in the recovery too. People who have lost the confidence to venture beyond their front door will need safe, trusted places to turn to and additional support to deal with the financial, social and health effects of lockdown. The outdoor spaces and community gardens located within the hubs will be important in helping people benefit from the restorative effects of nature and reverse the 'deconditioning' effect felt by many people – particularly those who are most vulnerable – after an extended period of isolation and inactivity.

Features and benefits

The community hubs managed by Groundwork are all different. They emerged from different starting points, have been developed to respond to the differing needs and aspirations of those who use them and provide a home for activities and services that vary depending on the availability of funding. However, the hubs have a series of recognisable – and replicable – features and all deliver broadly similar outcomes in terms of social and environmental impact.

Social spaces

The diversity of ‘entry routes’ is a key strength of the community hubs Groundwork manages. When asked what they enjoyed most about spending time in the hubs, many people spoke about the opportunity to socialise with a wide range of people who they might not otherwise meet.

The natural interactions that come from working alongside each other and eating together help many people who might find socialising difficult in other settings to grow in confidence. A volunteer at one of the hubs described the friendships formed there:

“There’s a family atmosphere but everybody helps each other and they all become friends in the end, you know what I mean, and we do things out of here as well, we do social groups, we do walking, sometimes we go to the pub or whatever, and we like all the ones with the learning difficulties to come with us because that’s what it’s all about, you know what I mean, and that’s what makes it nice.”

These social connections often become as important to people’s lives outside the community hub as within it. There are numerous

examples of new friendships forming, people coming together to celebrate birthdays and life events, and of volunteers helping one other through periods of ill health or other crises. One volunteer told us about the effect that volunteering at Grozone has had on her life:

“It’s given me a social life at night meeting my friends. It’s just opened up the time I meet people otherwise I’d be all on my own.”

The sense of belonging associated with volunteering or taking part in activities together in a shared space can increase the resilience of individuals and whole communities.

Valuing every contribution

One of the key characteristics of the three spaces, identified by both volunteers and staff, is their culture of valuing everyone's contribution equally no matter their starting point. Rather than being considered 'beneficiaries', those who use the spaces are referred to as volunteers and the focus is on what they contribute as much as what they gain from the space.

This approach is reflected in the sense of agency that volunteers speak about. Asked about what she did at @TheGrange, one volunteer said "What don't I do?", going on to say that getting involved in running activities alongside gaining qualifications in maths, English and first aid had increased her confidence and had a transformative effect on her life.

This reflects the culture at each of the community hubs, where Groundwork staff see their role as enabling the community to do something for itself rather than simply providing a service for local residents.

This can sometimes make life more difficult when it comes to accessing funding, as many funders are interested in beneficiary numbers. Andy, project manager at Grozone, explained:

"If we referred to everybody as a beneficiary or as a service user or as a client, then we'd probably get more help financially with doing what we do... but in the end the whole point of Grozone being here is to improve people's wellbeing and to increase their self-esteem. Valuing every contribution that people can bring helps to do that, by treating people as a volunteer and somebody that is giving rather than taking from the project increases the benefit that they will get out of being here as an individual."

Stepping stones

In some cases, people have begun visiting a hub as volunteers and later progressed into paid roles with Groundwork. For example, Tom came to Grow Blackpool, the community garden at @TheGrange, through a health and wellbeing course. He had been suffering from depression and had no previous experience of working in a garden. He now works in a paid role for two days a week and continues to attend as a volunteer on the other three (sometimes four) days. For Groundwork this is an important way of ensuring paid staff are knowledgeable about the local area and have lived experience of the issues being faced by those they work alongside.

In other cases, being a volunteer at the community hubs has helped people to navigate their next steps away from the hub itself. One volunteer at the Grozone community garden, who was referred by his GP after having a stroke, developed an interest in mosaics from seeing a visiting artist working with a group. Staff at Grozone supported him to explore that interest and he now runs his own business creating and selling mosaics.

Another volunteer at the Green Patch started coming as a teenager. Due to his Asperger's and anxiety he had been unable to stay on in education or find employment and had been referred to volunteer by the local job centre. Over time he grew in confidence and formed some close friendships with other volunteers. Staff at the Green Patch started to speak to him about going to university and helped him to fill out application forms. He is now studying mathematics at Loughborough University and continues to keep in touch with his friends at the Green Patch, joining them for events during the university holidays.

In each case, the experience of coming to the community hub and having their contribution valued had played a part in helping individuals grow in confidence and make their next steps.

Health and wellbeing

Being part of life at a community hub can have a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of volunteers. Grozone community garden runs horticultural therapy courses and other activities which have an explicit focus on wellbeing outcomes, while in other cases improved wellbeing flows from other types of activity, for example the social connections that can combat loneliness or the skills and confidence gained that can help people move into employment, a key determinant of health.¹³

Many of the most active volunteers in community hubs had initially come to them after experiences of ill health or an adverse life event, and speak compellingly about how having a space to come to where they are valued as part of a community helps them to cope with these challenges:

“There’s a variety of people every day that I come, different people, nice to talk to, very good interaction, keeps my mind ticking over, I’m meeting people, I’m doing things physically and mentally and it helps with my anxiety – my mind’s not focusing on things that it shouldn’t be, you know I’ve got stuff to do here, it keeps me occupied, and I find that’s very therapeutic.”

In many cases the impact on individuals has been

transformative. When asked about the difference @TheGrange had made to her life, one volunteer said:

“Changed me for the better. If I hadn’t had it, I don’t know, I’d probably still be sat at home and not communicating with people, I probably would have gone back to my ex-partner and stuff like that, so... I wouldn’t have passed what I’ve passed and I wouldn’t have no way achieved what I’ve achieved in the year that I’ve not been with him. So, yeah, definitely had a big impact on my life, and my kids as well.”

Some of the most involved volunteers at the three community hubs are people who have learning disabilities, a group which is known to be at high risk of experiencing loneliness and related poor health outcomes.¹⁴ The culture of valuing everyone’s contribution equally means that many volunteers with learning disabilities enjoy socialising and forming friendships with a wide range of people, fostering a sense of belonging which can be harder to find elsewhere. One of the volunteers described the enjoyment he gets from spending time at Grozone:

“It keeps you calm, relaxed, enjoy things, happiness and things the way they are and not like feel down. You come here feel down and go on the little swing thing on the

gazebo, little swing thing, so that’s alright. So it’s good things.”

Grozone and the Green Patch are predominantly outdoor spaces, while @TheGrange includes the Grow Blackpool community garden, meaning that all three allow their local communities to access the wide range of benefits associated with spending time in green space and partaking in community growing.¹⁵

As well as the obvious physical activity benefits of gardening, a key feature of the communal experience at hubs is growing and learning about food. Volunteers and other visitors learn how to grow, harvest and cook with fresh produce. Cooking and eating together is an important part of life in all of the hubs, which helps to build a sense of togetherness among volunteers and gives people time to talk and get to know one another.

The food grown at the community hubs gets put towards a wide range of uses. The Green Patch provides fruit and veg boxes to local residents at a small cost, helping to bring some income to the site. At @TheGrange, fresh produce from Grow Blackpool goes into the HIS Shop where shoppers can 'buy' it using points earned through volunteering, which provides vital support for some local residents who might be experiencing food poverty:

"I'm on Universal Credit and because I'm a single person I get the very lowest amount. We earn points, like the gardeners do, and it helps supplement – the food pantry – the points help supplement my food for the month."

The full impact of the activities carried out in hubs on individuals' wellbeing can be difficult to measure and is not always well captured in evaluations, particularly those that focus on particular programmes of funded activity. However, improved feelings of health and wellbeing were one of the most prominent themes that volunteers spoke about. Each of the three hubs is already involved in some form of social prescribing but there is potential to expand and improve these links so that they are able to have a positive impact on more people.

Community cohesion

One of the characteristics that marks out community hubs is their ability to bring people together from different walks of life, breaking down barriers in the community. People come to the hubs through different routes

and for different reasons but spend time together with a shared purpose, fostering understanding and mutual respect.

Reflecting on the impact Grozone has on young people fulfilling court orders, a member of staff from the Youth Justice team spoke about the benefits of them mixing with the volunteers:

"I think it's good for them to see that people do volunteer as well. Because when I take them back after half a day here I explain to them that a lot of the people here are volunteers and it's good for them to see that people do give up their time to come to places, which – I just think it gets young people out and mixing and sometimes they don't do that, so it's a good way of them sort of using their social skills, because some of them haven't got a clue how to speak to people."

This exchange between **R**, a volunteer who began coming to a community hub in retirement after losing his wife, and **T**, a volunteer in his 20s with a learning disability, illustrates the spirit of cooperation between people from different walks of life that is typical of the hubs:

T: We're like best mates, me and him, we're best mates.

R: That's right T.

T: We get on together, we have a laugh, we just tell jokes.

R: And we have a good time.

T: We have a good time.

R: You look after me and I look after you. And we don't tell each other

what to do, I always say what would you like to do don't I?

T: Yeah.

R: We have a good laugh like you say. It's just the atmosphere, it's just nice, and everybody who comes is lovely, you know what I mean. And everybody helps each other, we've all got different problems, some have got less problems than others, but if you can help someone it just makes you feel so much better. And when someone at the end of the day just says, 'oh I've had a nice time' or 'I've really enjoyed myself', it just [pats heart and laughs], you know what I mean, it gets you there and it's really nice, isn't it T.? Especially when you say, 'I've had a nice day and I've enjoyed helping you', makes all the difference doesn't it?

These connections between people of different generations, and people with different experiences from their lives outside the community hub, enrich the experience for everyone. The community hubs can act as bridges between different parts of the community, creating 'something in common' that bonds people together.

Enabling community life

Community hubs are fundamentally social places with relationships and trust at their core. The role of staff in facilitating and enabling community use at each of the three hubs is crucial.

Volunteers value the relationships they have with Groundwork staff who are frequently mentioned as key reasons they enjoy spending time in the space. Asked why she kept coming back to @TheGrange, one volunteer told us that for her it is all about the people:

“The friendliness. The people. The staff. Cath. I love Cath.”

Staff provide a consistent human face and provide the time and expertise needed to facilitate community-led activities.

The roles of staff working in the community hubs are varied, from ensuring that the sites are safe and well maintained, advising on plant care, applying for funding and meeting the requirements of grants, engaging with local people, cooking meals for volunteers, and often helping volunteers with problems they have encountered outside the space. Detailed knowledge of the community and willingness to listen are prerequisites to success.

Improving the environment

Each of the three hubs occupies a site which had previously been under-utilised, creating little value for either people or the environment. This has changed and each garden has developed into a busy, productive, and attractive green space which meets the needs of the community, but also promotes biodiversity, with a range of planting and features to encourage wildlife, from ponds to beehives.

This draws on Groundwork's longstanding experience of helping communities to regenerate derelict or neglected land and requires support from staff in negotiating permissions with local authorities and other public bodies, drawing up designs, undertaking community consultation and fundraising for capital works. In some cases the work to redevelop sites has been undertaken by local volunteers or unemployed people engaged in one of Groundwork's Green Teams, providing a cost-effective delivery solution while giving those involved – often young people at risk of becoming NEET – a sense of pride in creating a facility that will be used by their families and wider community members.

Beyond the physical improvements to the sites, the hubs help promote connection to nature and horticultural skills among many of the people who spend time there. During the coronavirus lockdown, volunteers from @TheGrange shared videos showing people how to continue gardening at home on their social media and have organised a Grange Park in Bloom competition with categories including 'best lockdown garden project'.

Staff and volunteers at the spaces are also involved in community outreach, sharing their skills to 'green' the towns in which they are based. The hubs have provided a base for projects improving local rivers and provided advice and inspiration to other community gardens and green spaces in the local area.

An emerging feature at the hubs is the opportunity to raise awareness among visitors and volunteers of climate change and biodiversity loss. @TheGrange has become a focus for developing community-led action on climate change and Groundwork is supporting local volunteers to secure funding for project delivery which could contribute to the local authority's climate emergency plan.



Lessons for successful practice

Groundwork's experience of managing community hubs at different scales and in different places, has led to considerable learning about the preconditions for success. There is no single blueprint for ensuring hubs can survive in the long term, but there are ways of working which can maximise their impact and their sustainability.

Mixed funding models

Accessing funding is a key challenge for all third sector organisations and our community hubs are no exception. The three hubs rely on a diverse range of income streams to cover core running costs and fund different activities, but the ability to do this through continually refreshing the service offered is a key ingredient in their longevity.

Grant funding plays a crucial role in supporting community activities in all of the hubs. The diversity of activities taking place is a key strength which helps the spaces not only to attract funding through different routes but also to sustain engagement with a wide range of people. However, it also creates challenges for managers who describe a ‘constant hamster wheel’ of applications and evaluations. The limited time periods on many grants means that it can be difficult to embed and sustain benefits, especially when working with more vulnerable members of the community.

The lack of join-up between the outcomes required by funders can also mean that it is difficult for community hubs to focus on the everyday activities that matter to residents. Convincing funders of the need to incorporate management overheads into activity-based funding applications remains a challenge. Without this revenue resource, the professional support which enables hubs to function – and continue developing – would not be available, placing

additional administrative burdens on volunteers.

As one of the community hub managers put it:

“Projects like this deliver outcomes for all sorts of other organisations, local authorities, CCGs, various different organisations... in terms of improving wellbeing, increasing resilience and so on. And it’s really hard for us to secure enough funding to be able to pay for the staff and the materials and the various bits of kit we need to carry on doing this.”

This is a key challenge in an environment in which funding sources for different outcomes are often siloed and long-term flexible funding for holistic services can be hard to come by. The most effective way of addressing this challenge is to ensure that hubs are perceived as part of the core infrastructure in a town or neighbourhood and woven into the plans and priorities of other agencies operating in the area.

At @TheGrange, the local authority provides a level of financial support to the community hub. Blackpool Council funded the refurbishment of the building and underwrites its core running costs. This has benefits as the Council bases some staff at the centre, making services more accessible to the community, and is invested in its success. Achieving this ‘critical mass’ of overlapping service delivery is

important in protecting against the loss of individual income streams. Operating with a base level of financial stability also unlocks the potential to use hubs as the setting for a wide range of service delivery, as described elsewhere in this report, the management of which can contribute to overhead recovery. It also enables the establishment of small-scale neighbourhood enterprises, which can diversify revenue generation. The hubs receive some rental income from community groups and other organisations who use the spaces within them for events and activities and the indoor space at @TheGrange has some long-term tenants. The Green Patch receives a small income from selling vegetable boxes in the summer months while Grozone charges families a small fee for its toddler group.

There will always be a limit to how effective, and how appropriate, these approaches are given the circumstances of volunteers and the need to ensure hubs fulfil their core purpose of providing free access to social and environmental benefits. However, as part of a mixed model they add a valuable contribution and can help hubs position themselves within other networks aimed at supporting community businesses and social enterprise.



Community engagement

It is a fundamental pre-requisite of success that community hubs are community-led. This is not the same as community owned. In many areas, community organisations have acquired assets and manage a wide range of initiatives from energy co-operatives to community-led housing schemes. The hubs Groundwork manages continue to require professional support and facilitation, particularly in areas where levels of social capital are low, or where there are pre-existing tensions within the community. However, this support needs to be genuinely enabling – providing a supportive platform for resident-led decision making and voluntary community action.

In some places Groundwork has developed hubs on sites or in buildings that were previously used as a base for service delivery by other organisations, particularly local authorities. Often, the local community has a long memory when it comes to past uses of a space, which can colour their attitudes to the community hubs. Where there is a legacy of poorly perceived service delivery or where a previous facility had to be closed against the wishes of local people, it can take time to rebuild trust.

Careful processes of community consultation have been vital to bringing people back into these

places. Holding events and celebrations early on has been a successful way to re-engage the community and demonstrate that a space is open and for everyone. The needs and priorities identified through consultations and events guide the services and activities in the spaces, which helps to bring more people in.

Funding to support pure community development activity or an ongoing process of community engagement can be hard to come by. Resources for this work need to be found from the management costs associated with grant funded activity or local service delivery. This requires scale and critical mass.

Ensuring that a 'community-led approach' is embedded in the way all services or events are run means that engagement and empowerment of local people is the 'default setting'. However, as with any community project, ensuring that all parts of the community are reached and the most diverse range of voices is heard is a perpetual challenge, and one which remains an ongoing process in the three hubs featured here. Remedying this requires those involved to embrace the concept of 'generous leadership' – providing the space for other specialist groups and smaller organisations to play an equal part in the delivery of activities and services – and to be funded to do so.

Supporting vulnerable residents

Given the nature and the geographical location of community hubs, one of the most significant – and growing – challenges is being able to respond to the complex needs of some residents. Because of their position as accessible, inclusive and trusted spaces, people often come to community hubs with difficult problems that they are struggling to deal with themselves. This is another reason to ensure that hubs are supported by professional staff given the potential for visitors to display challenging behaviour, disclose safeguarding concerns or demonstrate the need for crisis interventions. Even with this resource in place, however, staff and volunteers can find their expertise stretched, and dealing with the personal issues presented by visitors can take valuable time away from core activities.

Solutions to this challenge need to be found to ensure hubs both fulfil their purpose in improving the wellbeing and prospects of all members of the local community, but can also continue to act as vibrant, friendly safe spaces for the majority.

At @TheGrange, the co-location of other services, such as health, youth work and community policing, makes it easier to connect people to the support they need. One of the

@TheGrange managers suggested that having a dedicated caseworker based in the community hub who can help with access to social services, health, housing and other services would be the ideal solution for the local community. Funding for this type of support would enhance the role community hubs are able to play in the community. The idea of Citizens Advice staff running sessions at the Grozone community garden was being trialled before the coronavirus lockdown.

Community hubs can become very important to individuals, which is positive but can also have drawbacks. It is important that people do not become dependent on spaces and services, particularly given the funding challenges outlined above which mean that the long-term future of a community hub is not always secure.

As shown in this report, community hubs can help people to create friendships and networks which extend beyond the space itself and can provide an important layer of informal care for those who are most vulnerable. Fostering these networks is important to ensure that the benefits of being involved in a community hub continue even if the space were to close. Similarly, the role of the community hub as a stepping stone into education or employment, and a place to develop new skills and gain qualifications, is crucial to ensuring that a community hub leaves a legacy of resilience rather than dependency.





Conclusion

The three community hubs explored in this report provide a model for a place-based, community-centred approach to a green recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. The hubs create significant social benefits, connecting neighbours, building skills, helping people to move into work or education, and improving health and wellbeing. They also create environmental benefits, improving local habitats and connecting people with nature. The pandemic has challenged them, but it has also highlighted their importance.

If we are serious about a green recovery, investment in this type of social and environmental infrastructure must be recognised as having equal importance to 'grey infrastructure'. These hubs can become a focal point for rebuilding social connections and reversing the isolation that many people have experienced during lockdown.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made the extent of health inequalities in the UK much more visible, with many of the most disadvantaged households and communities hardest hit. While community hubs will never be a panacea, they can help to improve the health and wellbeing of local residents, improving access to green space, good quality food, exercise and opportunity.

Community hubs can also help to build the capacity of communities to respond to future crises and fostering links with local resilience forums could help ensure that neighbourhoods are better prepared for future emergencies. Among the biggest challenges that communities are likely to face are extreme weather events and the effects of climate change. The three examples in this report show that community hubs have the potential to act as a focus for community-led action on climate

change and nature recovery.

The Covid-19 crisis will have a long-term legacy in terms of the health and wealth of millions of people, with the worst impacts felt by those who already have least. Against this backdrop of challenge and uncertainty there is an opportunity to create a lasting legacy of more active and empowered communities, and a greater understanding of the social and economic benefits to be achieved from a healthy environment. This will take far-sighted leadership at national level, but it also relies on all of us taking action within our communities. Community hubs of the kind described in this report offer one model for how that potential can be realised.

Case studies

@TheGrange

@TheGrange is a community centre in Blackpool run by Groundwork with support from Blackpool Council. Opened in 2018, the centre has quickly become a vibrant hub bringing together local residents and providing a focus for community life.

The centre is based on the Grange Park estate, which is home to approximately 6,000 people. The area has significant socio-economic challenges and is among the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country.¹⁶ At the time plans for @TheGrange were being developed in 2017, 45.5% of local children and young people were living in income deprived households, compared to 19.9% nationally. Residents of Grange Park were more likely to be long-term unemployed compared with other Blackpool residents and England as a whole. 11.6% of residents described their health as bad or very bad, compared to 5.5% of people in England.¹⁷

The centre is home to a library, the Grange Pharmacy, a One Stop shop, a community café, theatre space and the HIS Community Shop. The HIS Community Shop is unique in that no money changes hands: volunteers earn points which can be traded in for food,

clothes, toiletries, furniture, cleaning products and white goods.

The centre's outdoor space has been developed into Grow Blackpool, a community farm where volunteers benefit from the therapeutic effects of working together in the outdoors while growing fresh produce for use in the community café.

@TheGrange benefits from core funding from Blackpool Council and some rental income from other organisations that operate from the centre. Grow Blackpool has received a three-year grant from the National Lottery Community Fund. Groundwork brings in additional funding through grants and partnerships to supplement these core funding streams and provide a range of projects and activities at the hub.

There is a packed schedule of events and classes for people of all ages of abilities at the centre, including kids' clubs, sports and keep fit, cookery, lunch clubs, arts and crafts and IT, as well as regular days out to local attractions for families. The centre also provides space for the local police, local councillors' surgeries, and for other organisations to hold events and meetings in the community.

Friends of Grange is a group of

local residents who raise money to support the community, often using the centre to put on events. Recently, when the café provision temporarily closed, the group stepped in and provided a takeaway café service for centre users, giving newcomers their first drink free to ensure a warm welcome.

The usual opening times for the centre are 9am-5pm on Monday to Friday and 9am-1pm on a Saturday. Grow Blackpool volunteering sessions take place from Wednesday to Saturday.

During the Covid-19 outbreak, @TheGrange became one of 12 Corona Kindness Hubs set up by Blackpool Council. Groundwork staff worked with a network of council workers, volunteers and support partners as part of a 20 strong team delivering vital food supplies and support to vulnerable residents in the Grange Park area. The team delivered over 2,500 food parcels and made 1,800 welfare calls to check on residents, providing much needed support to people affected by social isolation and loneliness.

[groundwork.org.uk/projects/at-the-grange](https://www.groundwork.org.uk/projects/at-the-grange)

[groundwork.org.uk/projects/grow-blackpool](https://www.groundwork.org.uk/projects/grow-blackpool)

The Green Patch

The Green Patch is a 2.5 acre Green Flag award-winning community garden in Kettering, Northamptonshire, which provides a wide range of activities for residents of the adjacent Grange housing estate and beyond.

The part of Kettering in which the Green Patch is based is among the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country.¹⁸ In 2015, 39.3% of children in the Avondale Grange ward were living in poverty, significantly higher than the 19.9% national average. Unemployment and the proportion of people living with a limiting long-term illness or disability are also both higher than the national average.¹⁹

Groundwork has been managing the Green Patch since 2007, transforming it from a site that was barely used and struggling for volunteers and customers, to a thriving and friendly hub that supports a number of different projects including after school clubs, employment programmes, alternative education, regular and supported adult volunteering, community use and events.

The Green Patch is funded through a range of different funding streams, with grants playing a key role. This is supplemented by income from chargeable activities, fruit and veg boxes, fundraising and corporate partnerships.

Through this, Groundwork funds a manager and a member of staff with responsibility for growing and maintenance.

Over the years the site has been improved by volunteers and currently consists of a multi-use building, polytunnels, beehives, ducks and chickens, raised beds, a summerhouse and natural play area, wildlife areas including two ponds, and orchards.

Eating together is an important part of volunteers' experience at the Green Patch, helping to strengthen the sense of community that has grown up around the site. Volunteers make meals with food grown on-site and can sometimes take surplus away to cook at home.

The Green Patch sees over 250 adults and children come through the gates every week with open volunteers' days on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 9.30am and 3pm.

groundwork.org.uk/projects/the-green-patch



Grozone

Grozone is a multi-award winning community garden, horticulture and wildlife project in Northwich, Cheshire, which Groundwork has been running since 2008.

The garden is built on a small patch of land between a railway track and a river on the edge of the town. The town has pockets of deep deprivation hidden within areas of relative affluence and the neighbourhood in which Grozone is based scores among the lowest 20% for quality of local environment and among the lowest 30% for the level of education and skills in the local population.²⁰

The site had been derelict for 18 years before Groundwork took it on, holding consultations and a community design event to ensure that the plans for the site met the needs and aspirations of local people. The site has developed over time and is now home to many raised beds and growing areas, an outdoor kitchen, a compost toilet, ponds, wooded areas and more.

In 2010, Grozone was awarded a grant from the People's Millions lottery, which helped to kickstart the community hub. This was followed by more significant funding from the Big Lottery Fund in 2014. This two-year grant enabled the team to expand and open the site six days a week, so that more people could benefit. The hub no longer has a source of core funding and management and maintenance are funded through the different projects and activities that staff run in and around the site.

The garden provides volunteering opportunities for all, with open sessions on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays between 10am and 3pm. An average of 23 volunteers come to the regular sessions. On Tuesdays, volunteers cook and eat together in the garden's outdoor kitchen and other activities include arts and music workshops, craft sessions and all kinds of outdoor activities. There is also a toddlers' session on Mondays from 10.30 until 12pm, which sees an average of 19 toddlers (plus parents and carers) enjoying the space.

The garden hosts social and horticultural therapy for people with mild to moderate depression and anxiety, including through the Roots to Wellbeing course which provides learners with a City & Guilds Level 1 Award in Practical Horticulture Skills.

Volunteers are referred to Grozone through a wide range of pathways, including local health services, employment services, social care, and youth offending teams.

During the Covid-19 lockdown, the garden was temporarily closed in line with government guidance. However, craft and horticulture activities continued to be shared with residents via social media videos and pictures, helping to keep the community connected through the crisis.

groundwork.org.uk/projects/grozone



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