



Greater Manchester
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Place, People, and Power: Community-Driven Learning from Wigan and Bury

February 2026



Executive Summary

This report summarises learning from the *Test and Learn* investments in Wigan and Bury (2023–2025), funded through 10GM and aligned with Sport England and GM Moving's ambition to build connected communities that enable active lives for all. The work explored how VCSE Infrastructure Organisations and community-based approaches can strengthen participation, tackle inequalities and support whole system change.

Two contrasting localities were selected:

Wigan

An area with established good practice and strong VCSE sports clubs, but without the infrastructure to support their development.

Bury (Whitefield/Besses)

An area with higher deprivation, lower activity levels and untapped potential for community development.

Across both sites, the pilots tested ways of working that prioritised developing local insight and relationship building and offering tailored, sustained support. The learning demonstrates that place-based approaches require time, flexibility and longer-term investment.

There were six key findings:

1. Relationship centred, place-based work is essential for change

Both pilots showed that trust building with community groups, sports clubs and statutory partners is fundamental. This required persistent engagement, listening to lived experience and responding flexibly to what local people, groups and organisations said they needed.

2. Dedicated roles provided capacity to work flexibly and responsively

The Sports Club Integration Coordinator (Wigan) and Community Development Officer (Bury) meant there was time to convene partners, create connections and identify opportunities for engagement and capacity building. Being able to work flexibly and relationally was key.

3. Community groups and sports clubs are powerful connectors

Sports clubs in Wigan began to recognise their broader role as community assets through this work. In Bury, VCSE groups facilitated access to youth voice, family engagement and hyperlocal insight. With support, these organisations provided trusted spaces, volunteering opportunities and new pathways into physical activity.



4. Capacity building and ongoing wraparound support are important enablers

Organisations needed support with governance, funding, training, volunteer recruitment, safeguarding and business/sustainability planning. Bury VCFA's whole team approach proved particularly effective in embedding this support.

5. Evidence of system shifts

The work contributed to changes in how physical activity is understood within health and care services and within the public service reform agenda in the two areas. In Bury, the pilot has significantly influenced the development of plans around Live Well and is seen as a model for how neighbourhood-based work can support prevention and community health and wellbeing. In Wigan, new feedback loops and improved connectivity with the system emerged through the relationships built with clubs.

6. Longer term funding is key for place-based work

Insights from both pilots have reinforced that place-based work to support people to move more takes time. These pilots used a test and learn approach, which is often short term in nature, however, the experience has shown that significant lead in time is needed for relational, community-led work. Staff felt pressure to deliver quick wins, however the reality is that cultural, relational and behavioural shifts require long term investment.

Impact

Increased collaboration between sports clubs, VCSE groups and statutory services.

New physical activity opportunities for children, young people, families and older adults.

Strengthened local networks, particularly through Wigan's club engagement and Bury's Community Connectors model.

Improved organisational capability through tailored capacity building support.

Enhanced sense of belonging, participation and community connection in both areas.



Recommendations for Future Place-Based Investment

1. Provide longer term, multiyear funding to reflect the realities of relationship centred place-based work. For test and learn investments, building in lead in time for relationship building is crucial.
2. Continue to invest in dedicated relational roles, as they act as catalysts for system change.
3. Invest in longer term capacity building for VCSE organisations/groups, in addition to funding, to create opportunities for communities to move more.
4. Promote whole-team approaches in place-based work, as a way to ensure joined-up, wraparound capacity building support for VCSE groups and organisations.
5. Align with wider system agendas; recognising physical activity as a tool for community wellbeing, safety and connection and the enablers that support the development of physical activity offers in communities.
6. Value relational outcomes- trust, confidence, connection -as key indicators of progress. Recognise the support required for staff members to work in complexity, including reflective practice and peer support.





2. Background and Introduction

Introduction

In 2023, 10GM invested in two VCSE infrastructure organisations in Greater Manchester to test out approaches that support Sport England and GM Moving's ambition of 'connecting communities' to enable active lives for all.

This report highlights learning from investments in test and learn sites in Wigan and Bury from 2023 to 2025, exploring how community-based approaches can support people to move more. The report shares Bury VCFA and Groundwork Wigan's project journeys, identifies enablers and blockers and discusses how integrating place-based and whole system approaches drives change. It concludes with a summary of what we have learned around "working in complexity" in two different localities in Greater Manchester.

Background and context

The investment in test and learn sites was shaped by five years of learning from GM Moving and 10GM's relationship and work together. The overall purpose of the investments was to:

1. Explore how to build connected communities to support active lives;
2. Test Sport England's Connected Communities strategy in selected areas.

This marked a shift away from the limitations identified in the Local Pilot model including working with Sport England defined cohorts and the requirement to work across all ten boroughs. A £200,000 investment funded two sites, with a co-design group shaping priorities and decision-making. As the co-design group discussed what they wanted to achieve through this work, it emerged that it sat naturally within the core functions of Local Infrastructure Organisations.

Priority areas were identified as:

1. An area with existing good practice to maximise impact; and
2. An area with greater need and untapped potential.

Broad aims for the investments were to:

- Strengthen the connections between community groups, community leaders and local partners who want to work together to help more people be more active, more often.
- Develop collaborative ways to foster relationships, build agency and partnerships to take collective action to enable active lives for all.
- Tackle inequality and inequity of access through the involvement of communities who face the highest barriers to movement, active lives and active places.

Anticipated outputs were:

1. A collection of good practice and practical examples of how sport, physical activity and movement helped to create more resilience and inclusivity in specific neighbourhoods.
2. Learning from the test sites about how to achieve the Sport England ambition of 'connecting communities' that can be adapted and built from.
3. A greater understanding of how inequality and barriers to access intersect, and how communities, and the clubs and organisations within them, can tackle both.

Groundwork Wigan and Bury VCFA's proposals for this work were successful, with both sites receiving £100,000 of investment.



Test and Learn- Overview

 Wigan | Groundwork Wigan

An area where there is already good practice that can be maximised through extra investment.

In Wigan, the focus of the test and learn was to strengthen the role of VCSE sports clubs as integral contributors to community health and wellbeing. Wigan already has an established Community Health Building Network funded through Sport England's Place Partner work, which promotes social prescribing and encourages the development of activities within local communities to support physical and mental health, learning, and social connection.


A hope was that this work could utilise the infrastructure created through the Network and build on this; widening the opportunities for social prescribing pathways within community sports clubs and creating more resilience and sustainability within these specific VCSE organisations. The project recognised that sports clubs were often under-represented in strategic discussions and aimed to integrate them into Wigan's Community Health Building Network; positioning them as visible and valued community assets within the local system.

The proposal was to use funding to employ a dedicated development manager to work alongside the Community Health Building Manager. This role would engage sport club leaders; nurturing relationships with those who are passionate about community health and wellbeing, providing tailored learning opportunities and linking with funding and development opportunities locally and at GM level. There was also an intention to "test and learn"; utilising tools such as the HAF e-voucher system to prototype new ideas. Additional support included incentives for participation, backfill funding for volunteer time, and providing support with marketing/comms.





Test and Learn- Overview

 Bury | Bury VCFA

An area where need is greater and there is untapped potential

In Bury, the test and learn focused on developing physical activity opportunities in Whitefield - an area with green and blue assets but limited community-based venues beyond the commercial sector. Social prescribing teams had reported a lack of local provision, with traditional sports clubs at capacity and requiring travel to neighbouring areas.

Mapping of Holiday Activity Fund bids also confirmed that there was minimal provision. In response to low activity levels among children and young people, the project prioritised targeted work with younger people, alongside work with families. Older people were also initially envisaged as a second cohort, however data around deprivation and activity levels resulted in a sole focus on children, young people and families.

There was also a focus on developing youth voice and civic leadership in line with the Bury Volunteering Strategy and Bury Promise. The approach aimed to strengthen and diversify existing offers and pilot new models, drawing on learning from the Radcliffe Local Pilot. Funding supported a part-time post for community engagement and capacity building, as well as training, volunteer expenses, and community investment shaped by local needs. It was also intended to explore leadership development through GM-wide Systems Leadership work.





3. Project Journey – Wigan

 Wigan | Groundwork Wigan

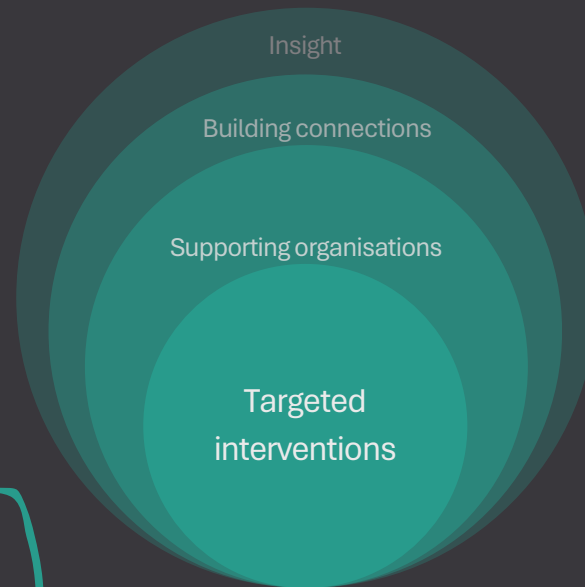
In Wigan, funding was used to create a Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator post, group training and development activities and community investment funding to support small test and learn projects. Here we explore the key elements of the approach taken in Wigan.

Insight

The Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator began by mapping the sports clubs in the borough. There were challenges in this process due to Wigan Council being unable to share sports clubs' details because of a lack of the necessary data protection consents. This meant that the coordinator only had access to a more restricted list. Building up a database of clubs, and working to identify the correct contact within clubs to have a conversation about community health building, took time and persistence.

Key points:

- A shareable list of clubs and up to date contacts does not necessarily exist within localities
- A database of clubs and contacts has been created in Wigan; enabling regular communication through mailings and conversations with people who have a role in club development.
- Finding the right contact within a club is key.



Building Connections

Significant time was spent building relationships and connections with and between sports clubs, and between sports clubs and VCSE organisations. The Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator met clubs in their own spaces and places; attending open days/evenings and tournaments at clubs across the Borough. They were also present in a range of health, care and sports related forums and events including:

- Keeping Connected Brews
- SHAPE Board
- Connecting the Dots
- Connect 5
- Community Health Building Operations Group
- Place Partnership Forum
- VCSE Training and Quality Assurance Working Group

Key points:

- Through this work, connections have been made to different services within Wigan and there is a better awareness of the many non-sports based VCSE organisations and statutory services that have potential to collaborate with sports clubs.
- Proactively and repeatedly reaching out and meeting clubs in their own space was vital to building trust and connections.
- There are significant demands on sports clubs' volunteers' time and the appetite for a sports club network was unclear.



Project Journey – Wigan

 Wigan | Groundwork Wigan

Supporting Organisations

Drawing on learning from the VCSE Training and Quality Assurance Working Group, the Sports Integration Co-ordinator was able to ask clubs questions about current support and capacity and connect them to Wigan Council's Community Officer [training](#).

Key points:

- Clubs were often keen to understand what support the Sports Integration Co-ordinator could offer to them, particularly in relation to funding.
- Understanding the landscape of what is available to the VCSE sector and proactively sharing information with clubs supported engagement.
- Clubs were at different points in their journey and some were resistant to the idea of being part of a community health building movement.

Targeted Interventions

Where there was enthusiasm within a club to create opportunities for community health building, the Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator worked closely with the club to build relationships and grow activities. This involved identifying the unique assets and strengths of clubs and spotting opportunities for connection and collaboration. Details of targeted interventions and key learnings are detailed in the case studies below.





Project Journey – Wigan

 Wigan | Groundwork Wigan

Aspull Rugby Club – opening up space to the community

Aspull Rugby Club is a local club based in North Wigan which had space available during the day. Through the Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator, they were connected into a conversation with Wigan Borough Federated Healthcare Team.

The Team had received feedback from patients that there was nowhere locally for people aged 65+, as most activities had moved to the town centre. They were looking for a venue to host exercise classes for people identified as in need of a falls prevention class, as the GP practice they had been delivering from was reaching capacity. As a result of the new relationship with the club, regular exercise classes were introduced, delivered by staff from the Team. The Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator also connected the Team with a community group offering informal drop-in social activities at [Brian Boru Irish Club](#) in Ashton in Makerfield.

Taking the learning from this group, the Team hoped to develop similar community led activities in Wigan North, with PCN staff supporting community leaders to lead groups/sessions independently. To better understand what the community in Wigan North wanted, a community day was held, with over 40 residents attending and support on offer from [Tech Mates](#), [Pensioners Link](#) and [Be Well](#) services.

Residents expressed that all major services are difficult to access in the area, if you are dependent on public transport. However, people weren't at a point where they could share a clear vision of what they would like to see within their neighbourhood. A chair-based exercise class continues to run from the club with support from the Integrated Healthcare Team (on a referral basis). Due to changes in capacity within the Team, further development of residents' groups has been difficult to progress; highlighting how changes in capacity within the system impact work to develop community-based health and wellbeing activities in clubs.





Project Journey – Wigan

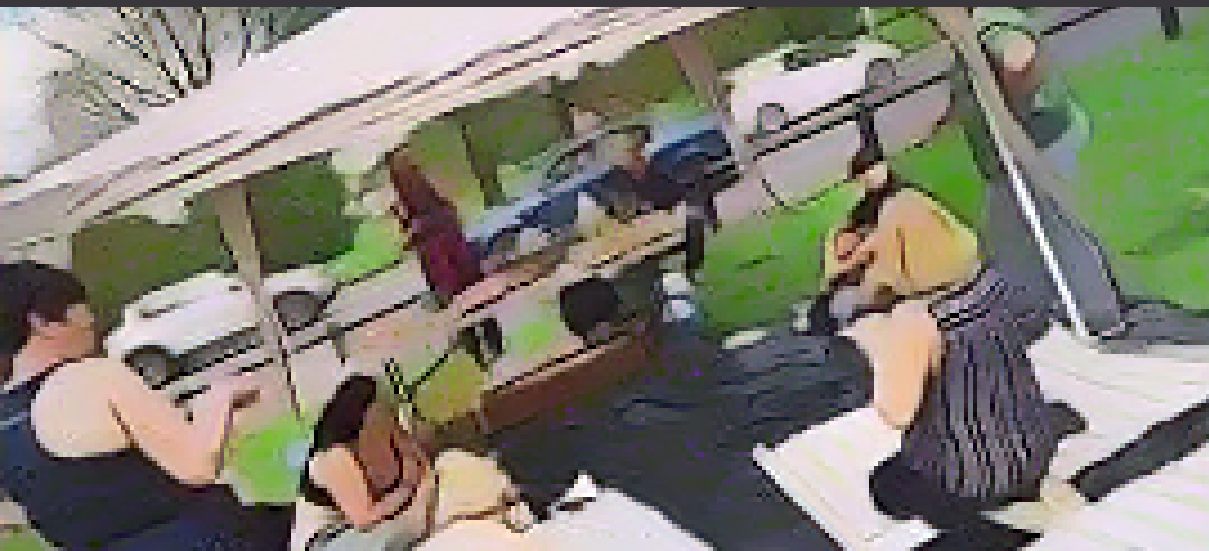
 Wigan | Groundwork Wigan

Ince Rose Bridge Sports and Community Club – new partnerships supporting community involvement

Ince Rose Bridge is an amateur Rugby League Football Club based in Ince-in-Makerfield. With support from the Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator a strong relationship was built with Wigan Women’s Angel Group.

Wigan Women’s Angel Group (WAGS) was established as a safe and supportive space for women, following the loss of a friend to suicide. The group offers a welcoming environment for women who feel overwhelmed or have nowhere else to turn, meeting twice weekly - one daytime session and one in the evening.

The group initially received £1,500 in funding from a local councillor, alongside reduced rate room hire at a new football facility in Ince. As membership grew, women took part in a range of wellbeing activities including arts, crafts and reflection sessions. However, increasing venue costs soon made the arrangement unsustainable.



Through their relationship with the football club, the Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator was introduced to WAGS and connected them with Ince Rose Bridge Sports and Community Club. The club offered to host the group during the day for a minimal fee to cover opening costs. Since relocating, WAGS has gained momentum, expanded its membership, and now has participants who actively suggest and lead weekly activities. The relationship with the Sports Club has opened up opportunities to volunteer - with some members volunteering at matchday tidy-ups and pre-season refurbishment sessions. The group also organises a weekly weekend ‘walk and talk’, exploring local trails - an initiative that has inspired several women to enter and complete the 5k event at the local Running Festival.

Core members have also attended a Keeping Connected Brew (part of the offer from the Community Health Building Network) where they linked with the Growth Company and referred clients into the group. One woman, newly arrived in the area and feeling isolated, has since flourished through attending the group regularly. She now participates actively and has begun leading small group sessions herself.

Key points:

- The role of a connector (like the role played by the Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator) is vital to understand the local landscape, spot opportunities and facilitate relationship building between sports clubs, statutory services and VCSE groups.
- Resident engagement takes time, particularly to create a supportive environment where people feel able to share their hopes and dreams for the area.
- Consistent staffing capacity is needed to help develop groups and activities and take plans forward.
- The work can feel like two steps forward, one step back; even with significant engagement from a club, the statutory sector and the community, staffing changes can slow or halt the development of activities.
- Clubs can offer community-based venues that enable smaller and micro VCSE groups to flourish.
- Partnerships between VCSE groups and sports clubs can help to broker community members into volunteering opportunities, which they may not otherwise have been aware of or confident to participate in.



4. Enablers - Wigan

 Wigan | Groundwork Wigan

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice was already embedded within the team at Groundwork and was consistently modelled – for example through a weekly Community Health Building Blog. This regular sharing, in a public context, of reflections around working across different parts of the system, navigating conversations and relationship building, created a strong sense of permission to test out new approaches, and to fail.



“*Reflective practice is an easy way to share the learning that is going on across the system. It can be used to help steer the ship, to clarify direction in the work you do. Working in a complex system it can be hard to demonstrate changes going on when we're trying to make a system change and it's very easy to feel lost. But reflective practice provides evidence of the journey and the more I've got into it, the more I see its value and the benefits it brings to mine and others' work.*”
Melissa, Community Health Building Lead

The Sports Club Integration Coordinator was encouraged to adopt reflective practice from the outset, including during the recruitment process, and began contributing to a reflective blog within their first few weeks in post. This practice provided an important mechanism for sustaining efforts to build relationships and connections with clubs, even when tangible outcomes were not immediately evident. Embedding reflexivity supported recognition of relational work, the interconnections across the system, and also helped manage the uncertainty inherent in working within complexity.

“*Recently I've learned that actually if I started but I couldn't finish, that's not a fail, it's just learning. I'm now trying to channel this confidence into my work to start something with a club that we could all learn from to support our communities.*”
Hannah, Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator

A key challenge for the staff member was maintaining momentum when progress was slow, or the impact of work was not yet visible. Working at “the speed of trust” is potentially slower with sports clubs than with other VCSE organisations/groups. Regular reflective practice and proactive sharing of learning through the weekly blog also provided coherence to work that might otherwise appear fragmented. This approach also documented the staff member's professional development, including increased confidence and willingness to share perspectives, alongside the evolving connectivity between different parts of the system.

“*Where the challenges lie, is where we make the most learning, there's no such thing as a failure, only learning.*”
Hannah, Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator



Enablers – Wigan

 Wigan | Groundwork Wigan

Working flexibly and responsively

The ability of the staff member to respond flexibly to emerging needs within the relationship with each club, rather than adhering to a rigid and predefined job description, proved critical. This role required a broad skill set and values aligned with the work, including confidence to operate within strategic and system-level spaces, the capacity to interpret complex or jargon-heavy information for different contexts, strong motivation to build relationships, and the ability to identify opportunities and connections. It also demanded competence in signposting resources and funding opportunities, as well as balancing immediate practicalities with longer-term objectives.

In Wigan, this flexible approach enabled the creation of feedback loops between sports clubs and other parts of the system, facilitating connections and incremental progress without relying on clubs' attendance at formal forums or networking events. Flexibility also encompassed providing capacity-building and sustainability support, including guidance on health-specific topics and linking groups to key contacts and community facilitators.

The Co-ordinator played a pivotal role in identifying opportunities for collaboration and linking sports clubs as community assets to wider initiatives, such as:

- [Wigan's neighbourhood agenda](#)
- [Family Hubs](#)
- [Living Well Spaces](#)
- [Listening Lounges](#)
- [Early Help](#)





5. Key Blockers - Wigan

Wigan | Groundwork Wigan

Despite progress, sports clubs face significant challenges in becoming community assets:

Capacity and funding

Capacity and funding are the main barriers. Most grassroots clubs rely heavily on volunteers, creating challenges around:

- A reliance on a small core group of individuals which can lead to issues around burnout and barriers to delivery.
- Challenges in offering regular sessions for target groups, as a lack of trained coaches and facilitators means clubs cannot always meet demand.
- Administrative burdens, including funding applications and compliance requirements, which take away valuable time from delivering sessions on the ground.

Difficulties establishing contact with clubs and identifying decision makers.

- Decision-making within VCSE sports clubs often occurs at committee level, which extends the time required to build trust. Find the right contact can be difficult.

Limited capacity to engage.

- As many clubs are volunteer-led, their capacity to participate in networking and development opportunities was more limited than anticipated.

Community engagement takes time and resource.

- Creating multiple opportunities for engagement and the building of trust is needed, and both clubs and the wider system can struggle to resource this.

Unexpected changes in system capacity

- Unexpected changes in system capacity also impact the development of new activities within sports club settings.

Immature relationships and trust with and between clubs.

- An attempt to introduce a youth volunteer co-ordinator role faced blocks due to insufficient trust in the relationship with the Sports Club Integration Co-ordinator and in the relationship between clubs themselves. There was also a lack of belief in the benefits of longer-term planning around volunteer recruitment and engagement.





5. Systems change in Wigan

 Wigan | Groundwork Wigan

Wigan's test and learn work has helped develop our understanding of the conditions required for sports clubs to play a broader role in communities and in supporting people to move more. The work showed that change was not dependent on sports clubs being more present in system spaces, or there simply being a better flow of information from health and care systems through to clubs. Some of the factors identified through this work as supporting systems change include:

Shifts in the self-concept of sports clubs, to recognising that they potentially have a broader role than organising/delivering single sport activities.

People running clubs begin to view it as a community asset, with a part to play in supporting the health and wellbeing of the community (even for those who do not play sport) and increasing access to social or career related opportunities. Clubs in Wigan are at different stages of their journey with this – with some resistant to any idea of an expanded role, others open to taking the first steps, and a small number already established in this way of thinking and looking to create further opportunities. Having a staff member with capacity, patience and confidence to initiate conversations with clubs about their potential role in the community and to share examples of other clubs working in this way was helpful.

“Really tapping into the community and... growing it in participation and that equality – no matter what background you come from – if you're not sporty, if you just want a sense of belonging – bringing it down to the community and what we can do for them. We're not just a rugby club”
Ince Rose Bridge Community Club

“Developing the St Johns football fields to more than just football but also to a place where the community can gather and support each other.”
Wigan Cosmos

A proactive approach to building stronger connections and relationships between clubs

In Wigan, clubs are becoming more open to being more connected to each other - with a growing willingness to work in collaboration. This could be in terms of opening up their facilities to a greater plurality of sports – for example rugby clubs opening up their fields to football teams, and cricket clubs sharing their facilities with rounders teams. Due to demands on time, clubs were unsure about whether they needed a designated forum or space to meet regularly. However, having a person with knowledge of the local sports landscape, who can highlight examples of successful collaboration and facilitate conversations about possible collaborations and resource sharing is helpful.

Creating feedback loops, so that information can flow between different parts of the system.

Feedback loops developed organically during the test and learn work, through the Sports Integration Co-ordinator's role and their ability to visit clubs in their spaces and at times that worked for them. The Co-ordinator was able to share information with clubs and support connections with relevant teams within the health and care system, whilst also sharing information about club development and needs into strategic spaces. There was a strong focus on working flexibly with clubs and bringing conversations into club settings, rather than expecting clubs to attend external events and meetings:

“We offered to host Keeping Connected Brews at their venue to showcase to other VCSE and Statutory services what the club can offer”
Hannah, Wigan Sport Integration Co-ordinator



Systems change in Wigan

 Wigan | Groundwork Wigan

Recognition within the system of the pressures on capacity within Sports Clubs.

Through this work there was a greater acknowledgement that people running sports clubs are rarely employed full time and are often volunteers, who are juggling other commitments including paid work and caring responsibilities. Understanding these pressures and limitations is key to engaging with Clubs – there is often a need to meet outside of normal working hours and to make multiple attempts to connect with Clubs in order to build relationships.


Key Enabler

Having a specific staff member with capacity to connect into different spaces and conversations in the system and who could invest significant time and energy in building relationships and having conversations with sports clubs was key to supporting sports clubs to reimagine and grow their role within the community.





3. Project Journey – Bury

 Bury | Bury VCFA

In Bury, funding was used to create a part time Community Development Officer post focused on Whitefield, and to support training, volunteer expenses and a community investment fund for activities. Here we explore the key elements of the approach taken in Bury.

Insight

Bury’s pilot began with a focus on supporting children and young people within a place, but then quickly evolved to meet local needs and explore the role that sport and physical activity can play in community development. The work initially focused on Whitefield and then narrowed down to one specific area - Besses. Through local data/insight (e.g. Active People, Census, Neighbourhood dashboards), it was identified that:

- The area has the largest population of 10-19 years olds around 1500 (mainly White British);
- It is the most deprived ward in the neighbourhood and the 5th most deprived ward in the borough;
- It has some of the highest reported levels of anti-social behaviour in the neighbourhood;
- There are challenges around access to transport due to the neighbourhood being bound by motorways/main roads.

Local people’s voice and lived experience shaped the project’s direction. There were challenges experienced in terms of school engagement which included accessing the right staff members (a mixture of pastoral care as well as subject matter leads) as well as encouraging discussion around physical activity beyond direct operational issues (e.g. “can you fund a dance teacher?”) , so youth voice was instead captured through work with Victoria Community Centre’s young leaders and participants via the local youth service.


Key points:

- The specific are of focus for this type of work can take time to emerge.
- Identifying community assets and where to focus energy involved drawing on data sets and also spending time in conversation and listening to people and organisations and groups in the Whitefield area.
- Listening to local voices and understanding place identity is essential for designing responsive, relevant, and sustainable interventions. Co-design and asset-based approaches lead to a stronger local ownership of activities. Hearing youth voice was a key priority and required reaching young people in settings beyond school/education.





Project Journey – Bury

 Bury | Bury VCFA

Building Connections

A key focus of the work was building relationships with and between organisations/groups in the area and raising awareness of opportunities available. Physical activity is not the primary focus for many of the VCSE organisations and groups in Besses and there were challenges around making connections and developing relationships. It took significant amounts of time and multiple conversations and points of contact with different staff members from Bury VCFA, to build relationships.

“*The risk is that people can get lost/bored if it takes too long and so there is a temptation to put an activity on to "feed the beast".*
Bury VCFA

Mapping work was undertaken in Whitefield, identifying VCSE groups already working there. Asset mapping was then done specifically for the Besses area and this was visualised using a Padlet. Community Connectors Meetings were established in the area by Bury VCFA. The meetings covered topics highlighted as of interest to groups including: marketing activities, volunteering and funding. However, the primary purpose of these meetings was to facilitate peer support and connection. These sessions resulted in a mailing list of 60; from groups who are embedded in the project such as [Victoria Community Centre](#), through to those with a specific physical activity focus, and others such as [Art in Whitefield](#) and local churches.

Connections and relationships with schools/education were seen as important as they are both key assets in the area and provide access to youth voice. It was difficult to gain traction with schools and where connections were made, they remained largely transactional. An unexpected outcome has been a relationship with the Highways Agency; creating opportunities around Employer Supported Volunteering particularly around local green spaces.


The Community Connectors approach has been a key proof of concept with Bury VCFA both in terms of further work (mentioned below) and in ways of working resulting in similar sessions being established in the North and Prestwich Neighbourhoods of the borough with ambitions to ensure boroughwide coverage in 26/27.

Key points:

- Asset mapping is useful, both in terms of understanding priorities for connections and relationship building and also to support with discussion in other contexts (e.g. Public Service Reform meetings).
- Engagement can take time and can be frustrating for staff members, especially when new to an area or this type of work. Having deep knowledge within the team around place-based approaches was important to guide the work.
- Persistent, multi-touch engagement is essential to build trust, especially in volunteer-led or under-resourced community organisations. Engaging local VCSE groups takes time but is key; often groups and club are the gateway to local people, in spaces and place that they trust.
- Having a strong shared understanding within the team at Bury VCFA about this work and the priorities in terms of relationship building was important, to build a connection with one of the key community assets in the area.
- The Community Connectors Sessions provided important opportunities for the project worker to have initial meetings/conversations with groups in the area.



Project Journey – Bury


 Bury | Bury VCFA

Let's get Whitefield Moving – the impact of new connections in place

Bury VCFA worked in partnership with local VCSE organisations in Whitefield to co-design a programme of sport and physical activity aimed at children and young people, funded through the community investment element of the test and learn pilot.

A local delivery partnership was set up to run a summer programme of 3v3 football (ages 12-15), beginners cricket (ages 4-17), Thai boxing (ages 11-16), and walking and cycling activities (ages 8-17). Through six weekly sessions over the summer holidays, the programme engaged 90 children and young people aged 4-16, from across Whitefield. The programme is evidence of what can be achieved when VCSE groups in place are supported to build stronger collaborative relationships:

- Through co-design, a varied and complementary offer could be developed and timetabled on different days.
- The collaborative approach also meant that the young people/families who were participating could be easily signposted to other activities as part of the programme.
- New relationships and connections enabled skills sharing and peer support between organisations/groups.
- Activities created spaces where people could come together and experience a strong sense of community and belonging


 *“Working in partnership with other local VCSE organisations in Whitefield has been incredibly beneficial. The collaboration brought together a wealth of resources and expertise, which enriched the sessions. It has been great to meet other local organisations and bounce ideas and plans around to improve the overall offering to the local community”*
Phoenix Outreach CIC

Next steps: There are ongoing conversations around capacity building support to enable organisations/groups to keep the children and young active into the autumn and winter months. This support will include funding to subsidise training fees for economically disadvantaged young people, equipment, and funding to support volunteers/coach education. Connections between the Thai boxing offer and youth justice and the work of the VRU and Violence Reduction Facilitator in Bury are also being explored. The community insight and engagement from this work has strongly influenced Live Well planning in Bury





Project Journey – Bury

 Bury | Bury VCFA

Supporting Organisations

The team at Bury VCFA worked collaboratively to capacity build existing assets and organisations with the aim of improving their growth/delivery capabilities and their sustainability. There was strong understanding within the team that this is key to successful, connected and active communities. This whole team approach meant that the knowledge, skills and relationships of the capacity building team, the community development worker and the Violence Reduction Unit facilitator could be drawn on, to support organisations and engagement.

The Community Connectors Meetings (see above) also included learning elements, around key areas of capacity building.

Key points:

- Ensuring that the work was not siloed within one part of Bury VCFA meant that the knowledge and skills of the whole team could support this work
- Taking a strategic approach to who attended meetings with organisations/groups was helpful. Including staff members with a capacity building and strategic focus from Bury VCFA not only ensured the right support was available, but in turn secured the presence of people with the ability to make decisions (e.g. the Chair of the organisation, rather than only project workers attending)


Targeted Interventions

Through insight work and relationship building, Bury VCFA began to identify organisations and groups that could benefit from access to community investment funds and/or tailored capacity building support from the Local Infrastructure Organisation.





Project Journey – Bury

 Bury | Bury VCFA

Victoria Community Centre – a team approach to engagement and development

Victoria Community and Youth Centre was identified as a key asset in Besses, as a community venue with a youth service offer.

The project worker's initial attempts to build a relationship with the centre proved difficult, and public sector partners were also unable to broker a connection. Progress came through a chance meeting between Bury VCFA's CEO and a resident connected to the centre's committee, at a Boroughwide tenants' and residents' session. The centre's attendance at a Community Connectors meeting, also enabled a first meeting with the project co-ordinator. Bury VCFA's collective insight about the organisation and its challenges led them to test out a team approach, in their next meeting with the Centre. Bury VCFA recognised that physical activity is a tool for the Victoria Centre, rather than an outcome; meaning that awareness of the wider operating context and bringing together expertise and support in terms of governance, youth work and physical activity was important. Involving several staff in this early meeting (including the [Violence Reduction Alliance](#) Facilitator, the Partnership and Policy Manager and the project worker) resulted in engagement from the organisation's chair, as well as youth provision staff. Key learnings from this work included the importance of patience - avoiding quick fixes that undermine community-based work - and breaking down silos internally and externally to ensure a joined-up approach to build capacity and sustainability. An important step has been to learn about and work with the bigger picture for organisations, rather than purely focusing on physical activity.


Next steps: Bury VCFA utilised a parallel approach of capacity building and delivery support to work with the centre. The test and learn project worker embedded herself in the Centre to support with integrating physical activity, youth volunteering and engagement work into their activity planning. They have also been able to connect the Centre with the Community-Led VRU Facilitator for Bury, to support around concerns related to knife-crime and youth violence. They worked with the Centre on grant variation for some existing funding for Youth Worker training, to support their existing offer and provided some seed funding to the centre of support the hire of a football coach. Alongside this, the capacity building team has supported the Centre with updating their governance to ensure it is fit for purpose; including Charity Commission filing and legal and financial elements, as well as elements such as trustee training.

Since the project, further work has continued to support the Centre around business planning and their offer. This has included developing closer relationships with the local youth service and supporting the development of a partnership with the [First Kick Foundation](#) to delivery youth interventions and physical activity from the centre several nights a week.





9. Enablers - Bury

 Bury | Bury VCFA

Shared understanding across the team

A clear, collective understanding of the purpose and priorities for relationship building enabled Bury VCFA staff to identify opportunities and progress connections, even when not directly involved in the project. Multiple team members engaging with local groups ensured relationships were sustained beyond the funded period. Building trust often required repeated positive contacts before deeper conversations could occur.

Creating peer connections

Bi-monthly Community Connectors sessions, incorporating micro-learning on marketing, volunteering and funding, helped raise awareness amongst VCSE groups of each other's work in the area and provided valuable opportunities for peer support and trust building between groups and with Bury VCFA staff.


Capacity building as a core element

As the Local Infrastructure Organisation, Bury VCFA provided wraparound support including training, volunteer recruitment, governance and funding advice. These sessions informed decisions on community investment funding and strengthened the sustainability of organisations and groups in the area. This whole-team approach deepened Bury VCFA's experience of place-based working and created a replicable model for future work.





10. Key Blockers - Bury

 Bury | Bury VCFA

Organisational churn

- Volunteer and staff turnover within groups disrupted activity development and progression, reflecting the challenges of relational work in short-term funding environments.

Relationships with schools/education settings

- Despite repeated efforts, building meaningful links with schools proved difficult. Alternative routes to capture youth voice included community venues and family activities in local churches.


Limited experience of place-based working

- While Bury VCFA brought strong expertise, staff new to this approach faced challenges navigating barriers without losing community focus. Maintaining motivation was difficult when engagement was low or progress slow.





11. Systems change in Bury

 Bury | Bury VCFA

Bury's work enabled the Local Infrastructure Organisation (Bury VCFA) to test out an approach to working in place at a hyperlocal level and offering wrap around support to VCSE organisations, as a way to build capacity. Testing out this way of working within a specific neighbourhood brought challenges; particularly around connecting and building relationships. However, the work has resulted in significant (and unanticipated) system shifts in Bury. Factors that supported systems change in this work included:

Making a direct investment into the VCSE sector


The investment represented a significant change for Bury VCFA in their relationship with the Local Authority; this was the first time that funding had gone directly to VCFA to lead on both management of funding and delivery of a project. Although there were challenges in making this work visible to staff within Bury Council, the test and learn work in Besses/Whitefield has created a system shift with more meaningful partnership conversations. There is a greater acknowledgement of the role the sector can play, increased trust in the sector to do good things with investment, and a transfer of "power" via direct investment. Ripples from the test and learn work can be seen in the discussions and plans for the Live Well Implementation Fund and the Live Well Communities Fund in Bury (see below).

Explicitly linking this work to the public service reform agenda

The test and learn work in Besses has enabled close connection with the public service reform agenda in the area. Staff from Bury VCFA regularly attended the Whitefield Neighbourhood Meeting. The forum includes Police, Fire, Housing, Early Help, Health, Council and the Live Well Team as core stakeholders. Being part of this group resulted in the test and learn project being listed as a key area of work on the neighbourhood plan, both generically and as part of the deep dive focusing on Besses. This connectivity supported conversations about the broader use of physical activity as a tool; for example around community safety. This represents a shift in terms of how physical activity is viewed within the system and is leading to a broader conceptualisation of how it can build safer and healthier communities.

Working in place – creating a replicable model for Live Well in Bury

The work in Bury was highly place-based; developing deep insights about Besses and Whitefield and an understanding of the fragmented community dynamics in the area. The test and learn work enabled Bury VCFA to actively demonstrate the value and impact of working in place, and the time and resource required to do this effectively. The work also evidenced the need for both funding investment directly into the VCSE sector and the need for wrap around infrastructure development support for the sector. Funding is both an important hook and support for the development of activities, however, building organisational/group capacity more broadly is also key, as is longer term funding. Demonstrating this approach has significantly influenced the development of plans around Live Well in Bury and is seen as a model for how neighbourhood-based work can support prevention and community health and wellbeing. Whitefield has now been confirmed as the Live Well exemplar model for Bury and has provided a crucial initial stepping stone to the engagement and co-production work moving forward. The work has also highlighted the key role of Local Infrastructure Organisations in building connectivity between different parts of the system and ensuring that the VCSE sector has capacity to access and utilise investment meaningfully.

 *"Funding is necessary, but a sustainable impact requires a long-term approach and wrap-around support to help local clubs and groups. Sustainable impact requires going beyond one-off funding to longer-term mechanisms."*
Bury VCFA

Key Enabler

Taking a whole team approach within Bury VCFA brought a wide range of skills and experience to the test and learn work in Besses. This proved key to building relationships, trust and capacity, so that VCSE organisations could engage and increase their physical activity offer. The whole team approach ensured connectivity to community safety/violence reduction work in the area. It also highlighted connections to public service reform and ensured strong visibility of this work in strategic conversations around prevention-based approaches and Live Well.



12. Working in complexity

Both the test and learn pilots generated insights into working in complexity and the experience of new staff members working in community-focused, place-based ways, with the purpose of creating the conditions for people to move more. Line managers of project staff in both Wigan and Bury brought a deep understanding of the learning and insight from GM Moving's Systems Leadership work, including leading in complexity, change and uncertainty. The approaches taken by staff in both projects were strongly influenced by Debbie Sorkin's ideas around leading and working in complexity.

“*[There is] no cause and effect –so you can't pull a lever and expect something to happen. You can't predict with certainty in advance: X might lead to Y, but it might lead to something entirely different or make no difference at all. You'll only know after the event.*”
Debbie Sorkin, The Leadership Centre

Factors that supported staff within the two projects to work and lead in complexity:

Taking small steps and accumulating

New staff without prior experience in place-based work faced challenges when outcomes were not immediately visible. Progress relied on incremental steps and regular reflection with wider teams; helping staff recognise the value of their work even when results felt intangible.

Asking open questions

Listening to communities and organisations was essential for shaping activities. Returning to settings repeatedly to build trust and connection, rather than arriving with ready-made answers, was vital in this work.

Making the invisible visible

Mapping, relationship building and system connections could sometimes feel like intangible work. Documenting and sharing these processes was important for sustaining motivation and momentum and being able to see where progress was being made.

Relationships and connections

Building trust required persistence and human presence, for example through attending forums, events and repeatedly reaching out. Facilitating links between groups and system partners took time and was vulnerable to changes in resources and staffing available. Keeping wider teams informed within Bury VCFA/Groundwork helped identify opportunities for connection.

“*Asset Based Community development has to move at the speed of trust to work effectively. How do we manage statutory partner impact-based expectations, during a phase that will have a different timeline in every neighbourhood?*”
Groundwork Wigan



13. Glossary of Terms

- 1. 10GM:** a joint venture to support the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector in Greater Manchester. The founding members of 10GM are Action Together, Bolton CVS, Manchester Community Central and Salford CVS. We deliver a wide range of collaborative projects and activities rooted in place through LIOs and connect them at a GM level. Find out more about 10GM [here](#).
- 2. Bury VCFA:** a local infrastructure organisation providing Volunteering and Development support to the VCSE sector in Bury, enhancing their ability to support local communities. Bury VCFA also promotes the VCSE sector and advocates on their behalf at a strategic level with other stakeholders. Find out more about Bury VCFA [here](#).
- 3. Community Led Violence Reduction Alliances:** Since 2022, 10GM has been working with The Greater Manchester Combined Authority Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) to deliver a programme of community-led approaches to violence reduction. Find out more [here](#).
- 4. Greater Manchester Moving:** GM's movement for movement working together to positively change the lives of people across Greater Manchester (GM) through physical activity and sport. Find out more about GM Moving [here](#).
- 5. Green and blue assets:** Green assets can refer to soft areas, plants and trees. Blue assets can refer to watercourses, ponds, lakes and storm drainage.
- 6. Groundwork Wigan:** supports local communities and businesses to build capacity and resilience, as this is vital if we are to tackle hardship, achieve a just transition to net-zero and help nature recover in a way that reduces inequality and leads to better work and healthier, happier lives. Find out more about Groundwork [here](#).
- 7. Live Well:** is Greater Manchester's movement for community-led health and wellbeing, aiming to build healthier, happier, and fairer communities by expanding opportunities for everyone to Live Well. More information [here](#) and [here](#).
- 8. Local Infrastructure Organisation (LIO):** support local charities, community groups and volunteers — helping people work together on what matters to them. Every place is different, but LIOs share a common goal: helping communities thrive. In Greater Manchester there are 10 Local Infrastructure Organisations. Find out more [here](#).
- 9. Local Pilot:** Sport England undertook 12 Local Pilots nationally to test innovative approaches to increase activity levels. In Greater Manchester the Local Pilot began in 2018 and has brought together leaders from across the ten localities, who are working at neighbourhood scale, in parallel to the work taking place across GM. The Pilot was targeted at three audiences, who are more likely to be inactive: children and young people, aged 5 – 18 years in out of school settings; adults aged 40 – 60 years, with or at risk of a long term health condition; people who are unemployed or at risk of worklessness.
- 10. Place based approach:** creating solutions that fit the specific needs and strengths of a community, rather than applying a generic, one-size-fits all model. It focuses on working with local people and partners to create change that is rooted in the reality of the place.
- 11. Place Partnership:** each of Greater Manchester's 10 boroughs has a 'place partnership'; a network of local residents, community organisations and key partners who share a common passion: creating healthier, happier and fairer communities. They recognise that physical activity, sport and movement plays a vital role in achieving this, even if they aren't directly involved in delivering sports or physical activity.
- 12. Whole system approach:** considering all parts of a system (people, organisations, policies, and culture) and how they interact. This includes: individual capabilities, motivations and needs, relationships and social networks, organisations and institutions, the physical environment, policy, cultural norms and ideologies. [Watch this GM](#)

Want to find out about more examples of how Greater Manchester's Local Infrastructure Organisations are helping our communities Live Well? Check out the [10GM website](#) or join the conversation on [LinkedIn](#).

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