Health and Wellbeing Board
18 November 2026
Thriving Communities Programme Evaluation
For Decision

Cabinet Member:
Cllr S Robinson, Adult Social Care & Health

Senior Leadership Team:
S Crowe - Executive Director, Housing, Prevention and Communities

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Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public Choose an item.

1. Executive summary

1.1 This report summarises the findings and achievements from Year One of the Thriving Communities programme delivered by Volunteer Centre Dorset (VCD). The programme was established to strengthen community resilience and support organisations that contribute to the health, wellbeing and independence of older residents across North Dorset, Purbeck and Weymouth.

1.2 The programme identified a wide range of community assets and demonstrated the significant contribution that voluntary and community organisations make in reducing social isolation, promoting wellbeing and supporting prevention. A key finding was that organisational resilience is influenced by more than funding alone. Many groups identified challenges relating to volunteer recruitment and retention, succession planning, governance, visibility and long-term sustainability. The programme also found that many valuable grassroots organisations operate outside formal networks and require proactive engagement to access support and opportunities.

1.3 In total 93 organisations engaged in nine locality-based networks and 40 network sessions, involving 331 participants. Learning from these activities informed the development of the Dorset Connect model, a neighbourhood-based approach that brings together community groups, councils, health

services and other partners to strengthen collaboration, share intelligence and address local challenges collectively.

1.4 The programme also introduced the ‘Try It, Do It, Grow It’ investment model, supporting community-led initiatives through flexible grant funding and practical organisational support. Overall, Year One has established strong foundations for a sustainable community infrastructure model, demonstrating the importance of trusted relationships, partnership working and targeted investment in achieving long-term community wellbeing and resilience.

1.5 Volunteer Centre Dorset (VCD) had a programme administration budget of £40,000 for year 1 and have spent £39,287. The grant award allowance was £132,000 and has spent £6,100. A breakdown of costs is provided in Item 7, while an explanation of the changes and the reason for the underspend is detailed in Item 6.

1.6 In light of the findings of this report, the Thriving Communities Reference Group (TCRG) has identified a strategic need to strengthen community capacity. Recognising that sustainable community development relies on trusted relationships, local knowledge, and practical support, as well as financial investment, the TCRG proposes the reallocation of £50,000 to provide additional staffing capacity (equivalent to 1 FTE) to support the expansion of these networks across the Dorset Council area. This would leave £75,500 available for allocation through support grants until the end of the current grant period.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1 Members of the board review the year 1 report as detailed in appendix 1 and note the successful outcomes and achievements.

2.2 Support the proposal to reallocate some of the grant funds to build resource capacity for Volunteer Centre Dorset to roll out the programme to the other 3 localities for year 2. The amount proposed is £46,000 for additional resource and associated costings.

2.3 Explore mechanisms to identify and secure longer-term opportunities to develop the model of this pilot programme into a more sustainable VCS system.

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

3.1 The Health and Wellbeing Board is the governance oversight for the Thriving Communities programme and sponsored the research and development work that led to this pilot programme being established.

3.2 Year One has established strong foundations for a community-led prevention model across Dorset. The programme has demonstrated that meaningful community development is rooted in trusted relationships, local knowledge and practical support rather than funding alone. Continued investment will enable the model will mature, strengthen community resilience and contribute to Dorset's wider health, wellbeing and prevention ambitions.

3.3 Ensure the pilot programme is included in the wider Dorset Council VCS commissioning transformation programme and considered as part of the community conversations currently being undertaken.

4. Programme Background

4.1 Under the Integrated Care Partnership strategy, in June 2023 a brief proposal was presented to the Dorset Health and Wellbeing Board to support place-based working in the Dorset Council area. The aim was to develop a plan to grow community support and capacity through the VCS, to support older people to remain living well and independently.

4.2 In June 2024, the Dorset Health and Wellbeing Board (DHWB) approved the development of a Project Delivery and Transition Plan for creation of a Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) led Dorset Thriving Communities Network (DTCN) model to support place-based working in the Dorset Council area.

4.3 The Thriving Communities project, through which the report was developed, was provided support, direction, and guidance from a multi-agency Thriving Communities Reference Group (TCRG). That group included representatives from Dorset Council; NHS Dorset; the VCS and Dorset Fire and Rescue Service.

4.4 Following detailed research and engagement the multiagency TCRG recommended presentation of the Project Report and Forward Plan (April 2024) to the Dorset Health and Wellbeing Board. That report provided the Board with compelling evidence for the development of a Dorset Thriving Communities Network.

4.5 It was identified that, through the growth of a Dorset Thriving Communities Network led by the Voluntary and Community Sector and supported by a partnership of Dorset Council, NHS Dorset, Public Health Dorset, the VCS and other partners, the relevant VCS infrastructures could be strengthened and the local groups who support older people could become more resilient and effective. The DTCN would also create potential to support the VCS in some of its challenges around leadership, development, governance, and

administration. The Thriving Communities Reference Group identified the need for transformation in the way Dorset Council and other partners work with the VCS.

4.6 **Appendix 1** provides the DHWB with Volunteer Centre Dorset's evaluation report of the 12 months Foundation Phase.

1. Key Findings

1.1 Engagement with grassroots organisations revealed that many of Dorset's most valuable community assets operate largely outside established voluntary sector networks and formal support structures. These groups are often volunteer led, highly trusted within their communities, and focused on addressing social isolation, promoting wellbeing and maintaining independence among older people. However, they are frequently invisible to traditional funding and support mechanisms, making proactive outreach and relationship-building essential. The report highlights that community development, and resilience depends on significantly more than grant funding alone.

1.2 Volunteer Centre Dorset identifies that financial need is often not the primary challenge facing community groups. While funding can be beneficial, organisations more commonly identify issues relating to volunteer recruitment and retention, succession planning, governance, safeguarding, visibility, participation levels, transport barriers and long-term sustainability.

1.3 Many groups were operating successfully on modest incomes through donations, membership fees and local support arrangements. In these cases, practical advice, introductions to partners, improved referral pathways or organisational development support were often more valuable than financial investment.

1.4 The programme also found that community capacity can be both substantial and fragile. Numerous longstanding activities relied heavily on one or two committed volunteers, creating a significant risk where succession planning was absent. The sustainability of lunch clubs, friendship groups and social activities often depends upon a small number of individuals whose retirement, illness or changing circumstances could threaten the continuation of valued local services. This demonstrated the importance of investing in organisational resilience alongside service delivery.

1.5 Another important finding was that not all organisations aspire to growth. Some groups deliberately remain small and informal because this enables them to meet local needs effectively. It has been identified that support is most beneficial when focused on maintaining sustainability and community value rather than encouraging growth for its own sake.

1.6 The programme further demonstrated that engagement activities must offer clear and practical benefits. Smaller organisations often lacked capacity to attend additional meetings unless participation resulted in useful connections, problem-solving opportunities or access to support. This learning informed the development of the Dorset Connect model, replacing multiple network structures with a more inclusive and action-focused approach. Trust and relationship-building emerged as critical infrastructure in their own right, requiring time, sustained engagement and a commitment to working at the pace of individual communities.

2. Volunteer Centre Dorset Programme Achievements and Future Priorities

2.1 Throughout the foundation phase, the programme established nine local networks, delivered 40 network sessions and engaged 93 organisations involving 331 participants. Twenty individual conversations were undertaken with community groups and stakeholders to better understand local challenges and opportunities. Five grant applications were supported, enabling 67 community activities.

2.2 The programme evolved to create the Dorset Connect model, bringing together voluntary organisations, town and parish councils, health and care partners, businesses and community stakeholders. Dorset Connect acts as a neighbourhood-based infrastructure for collaboration, information sharing, problem solving and community action.

2.3 Alongside this, the Try It, Do It, Grow It grant model was developed to provide flexible investment for testing new ideas, sustaining successful activities and supporting growth where appropriate. Grant awards supported initiatives addressing social isolation, digital inclusion, community engagement and accessibility.

2.4 The report concludes that Thriving Communities should continue to develop as a broader community infrastructure model combining relationships, organisational support, community intelligence, collaboration and targeted investment.

2.5 Future priorities include increasing engagement with grassroots groups, embedding Dorset Connect across Dorset, strengthening links with neighbourhood health services, improving organisational resilience and enhancing the collection of community intelligence and outcome evidence.

2.6 In light of the findings of this report, the Thriving Communities Reference Group has identified a strategic need to strengthen community capacity. Recognising that sustainable community development relies on trusted

relationships, local knowledge, and practical support, as well as financial investment, the TCRG proposes the reallocation of £50,000 to provide additional staffing capacity (equivalent to 1 FTE) to support the expansion of these networks across the Dorset Council area. This would leave £75,500 available for allocation through support grants.

3. Programme Budget and Spend for year 1

Administration Grant	**Annual Budget £40,000**	**Actual £39,287**
Staff costs	£29,208	£28,641
Direct costs	£1,386	£1,440
Indirect Costs	£534	£333
Recharges	£7170	£8873
VCS Grant distribution (up to October 2026)	Annual Budget £132,000	Actual £6,100

4. Legal considerations

4.1 The Foundation Phase contract has been awarded through a competitive "Request for Quotes" process. Should the programme expand following evaluation there may be a requirement for a full commissioning process.

5. Financial implications

5.1 This evaluation relates to year 1 of a two-year funded programme. Consideration is needed for how to take the learning from this programme to establish a sustainable model beyond July 2027 when the current grant agreement ends.

6. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

6.1 Supporting people to stay well and live independently by building strong community networks of support close to their homes should reduce travel and healthcare utilisation - both of which also have the benefits of reducing travel time and costs and in turn have a positive impact on the environment and reducing emissions.

7. Well-being and health implications

7.1 Collaborating with people to understand what keeps them well and healthy, and building capacity in the voluntary and community sector to offer support around these needs, should improve healthy life expectancy – keeping people living for longer in good health. Working in this way to develop person centred approaches should also have benefits for people's personal sense of wellbeing.

12. Risk implications

12.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

13. Equalities

13.1 An Equality Impact Assessment with resultant action plan has been completed.

14. Appendices

14.1 Appendix 1 – Thriving Communities Evaluation Report by Volunteer Centre Dorset October 2026

15. Background papers

15.1 Thriving Communities Health and Wellbeing Board 26 June 2024

15.2 Thriving Communities Health and Wellbeing Board 24 September 2025

16. Report sign-off

16.1 Due to the nature of this report it did not need to go through the full internal Dorset Council internal governance sign off processes. It has been discussed and reviewed by the lead Cabinet Member as Chair of Health and Wellbeing Board and the Executive Director of Housing, Communities and Prevention.

Appendix 1 – Thriving Communities Evaluation report

Thriving Communities

Building the Foundations for Community-Led Prevention

Year One: Learning, Progress and Future Direction

1 August 2025 – 31 July 2026

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Thriving Communities

Year One: Impact, Learning and the Case for Continued Investment

1. Executive Summary

Thriving Communities is developing a new approach to strengthening the grassroots community infrastructure that helps older people across Dorset remain active, connected, supported and independent.

Established as a Foundation Phase across North Dorset, Purbeck and Weymouth, the programme set out to test how local community activity could be identified, connected, supported and sustained. Year One has been a deliberate period of learning, testing assumptions and establishing and adapting the approach in response to what communities have told us.

One of the most significant findings is that community resilience depends on so much more than funding.

Across Dorset, valuable activities are often sustained by small, informal and volunteer-led groups that operate largely outside established networks. Many are financially self-sufficient, yet face challenges around volunteer succession, participation, governance, visibility, transport and sustainability. Some do not seek to grow or formalise; they simply want to continue providing something valued by their community.

The Foundation Phase has demonstrated that these groups cannot always be reached through traditional networks or funding opportunities. Building trust, spending time in communities and understanding the circumstances of individual organisations are essential. Sometimes a small grant can make a meaningful difference; at other times, an introduction, practical advice, stronger referral pathways or access to existing community resources can be more valuable.

This learning has fundamentally strengthened the Thriving Communities approach.

Rather than operating primarily as a network and grant programme, Thriving Communities has evolved into a connected model combining neighbourhood relationships, community intelligence, organisational development, improved access to local provision, collaboration and targeted investment.

At the centre of this approach is **Dorset Connect**, bringing together grassroots organisations, the wider voluntary and community sector, local councils, health and care partners, businesses and other stakeholders. The emphasis is not simply on bringing people together, but on what happens as a result: stronger relationships,

practical solutions, shared resources, improved referral pathways and opportunities for community-led action.

Alongside this, the **Try It, Do It, Grow It** grant model provides flexible, proportionate investment to test new ideas, sustain valuable existing activity and support organisations to develop where there is a clear need or opportunity. Year One has already provided practical examples of the value of this approach, from connecting community groups with health professionals and addressing barriers to organisational sustainability, to supporting established activities and enabling new opportunities for social connection.

The significance of the Foundation Phase lies not only in the activities supported, but in the community infrastructure and relationships now being developed around them.

For Dorset's health and care system, this creates an opportunity to strengthen the community foundations of prevention. Better connected, more visible and more resilient community provision can help residents access opportunities for friendship, participation, activity and support, while enabling local intelligence to inform wider planning and investment.

The next phase will focus on embedding this model, reaching more grassroots organisations, strengthening connections with neighbourhood health, making better use of existing community assets and developing clearer evidence of outcomes for organisations and residents.

Continued investment will enable Dorset to build on these foundations, and demonstrate the contribution of community infrastructure to prevention and develop a more sustainable, connected approach to supporting people and communities over the longer term.

What Has Changed in Year One?

The first year of Thriving Communities has already begun to make a practical difference to grassroots organisations, local partnerships and the people who benefit from community activity. Across the programme, we have established nine local networks, delivered 40 network sessions, engaged 93 organisations and recorded 331 participants, alongside 20 one-to-one conversations with community groups. These figures demonstrate the reach of the programme, but the more important evidence lies in what has happened as a result of those connections.

Community organisations are becoming better connected to the support and resources they need. For example, a volunteer-led singing group supporting people living with dementia and their carers had struggled to attract new members and was receiving no referrals from local GP practices. A conversation with an NHS

representative at a network meeting helped address this barrier. The group subsequently began receiving referrals, increasing attendance and enabling more people to access an existing source of companionship and support.

Practical intervention is helping organisations overcome barriers to their future development. A community organisation seeking to extend farm-based activities to older residents initially identified accessibility as its main challenge. Through further conversations, we uncovered an underlying issue with its land arrangements. Signposting to specialist legal support helped the organisation secure a formal lease, placing it in a stronger position to develop its activities and seek future investment.

Existing community provision is becoming more visible, supported and connected. Our work with volunteer-led lunch clubs, friendship groups and other informal activities has identified opportunities to strengthen links with social prescribing and primary care, improve how groups welcome new participants and address organisational challenges that may threaten their sustainability. Importantly, some of these groups have required no additional funding. The value has come from practical advice, introductions and helping them make better use of existing resources.

Small-scale investment is beginning to support locally identified opportunities. The Try It, Do It, Grow It approach has generated five grant applications totalling £6,100, responding to needs including improved visibility, accessible technology, transport and opportunities for social connection. These proposals demonstrate how modest, targeted investment can complement existing community assets and support activity that residents value.

Taken together, these examples show an emerging shift from simply bringing organisations together or offering grants towards identifying barriers, connecting resources and enabling practical change. We can already demonstrate improvements in referral pathways, organisational readiness and access to support. The next phase will build on these foundations by following organisations over time, measuring changes in participation and sustainability, and developing stronger evidence of the benefits experienced by residents.

The Foundation Phase has not yet demonstrated measurable reductions in demand for health or care services, and we would not claim that it has. What it has demonstrated is that targeted community development can address practical barriers, strengthen local provision and improve the connections through which people access community support. This provides a credible foundation for continued investment and a clearer focus for evaluating outcomes in Year Two.

PART ONE: WHAT WE LEARNED

2. The Opportunity: Strengthening the Community Foundations of Prevention

Across Dorset, a wealth of community activity already contributes to the health, wellbeing and independence of older residents. Lunch clubs, friendship groups, community cafés, walking groups, volunteer-led activities and informal networks provide opportunities for connection, participation, practical support and belonging.

These activities can also provide an important early connection to support when someone's circumstances begin to change. A volunteer noticing that a regular attendee has stopped coming, or a community group recognising that someone may need additional help, can create an opportunity for an early conversation, practical assistance or a connection to more formal services.

In this way, community organisations do more than bring people together. Through the relationships and trust they build, they can help people remain connected and supported, while providing an important bridge between individuals, their communities and wider health and care services.

Much of this activity operates quietly within communities, often sustained by a small number of dedicated volunteers and limited resources. These groups can be deeply embedded in local life, yet remain largely invisible to wider health and care systems, established voluntary sector networks and those who could benefit from their support.

The opportunity for Thriving Communities was not simply to create or fund more activity, but to better understand, connect and strengthen what already exists.

This meant looking beyond individual projects to the wider community infrastructure that enables local activity to thrive: the volunteers who sustain it, the organisations and spaces that support it, the relationships that connect people, and the knowledge and resources that communities already hold.

It also meant recognising that community capacity cannot be taken for granted. Valuable activities can be vulnerable to volunteer shortages, succession challenges, declining participation, limited visibility and practical barriers such as transport. Additional funding may help, but it does not necessarily address the underlying issues affecting an organisation's sustainability.

Thriving Communities was therefore established to explore a broader approach: identifying grassroots activity that might otherwise remain under the radar, understanding what organisations need, strengthening their capacity and

connections, and using targeted investment where it can make the greatest difference.

For Dorset's wider prevention ambitions, the potential lies in making community provision more visible, accessible, connected and resilient, while creating stronger relationships between communities and the services supporting residents.

Our ambition is not simply to fund more community activity. It is to strengthen the people, organisations and relationships that enable communities to support their residents and contribute to prevention.



3. What We Set Out to Test

Building a model around local communities

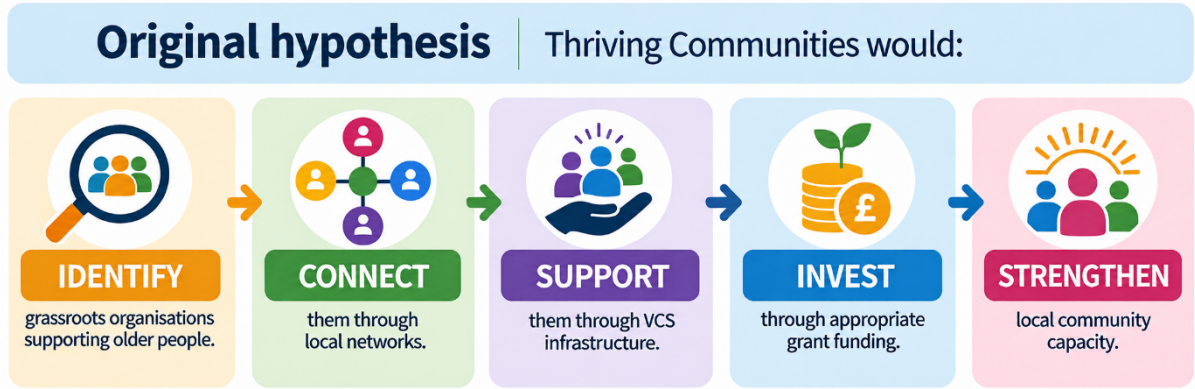
The Foundation Phase of Thriving Communities was established to explore how Dorset could better identify, connect and support grassroots, volunteer-led groups that contribute to the health, wellbeing and independence of older residents.

From the outset, the programme recognised that significant community activity was already taking place. The intention was not necessarily to create new services, but to understand how existing community assets could be better connected, strengthened, supported and expanded, and where relatively small amounts of investment could enable local activity to develop or become more sustainable.

The initial programme therefore focused on three areas – **North Dorset, Purbeck and Weymouth** – and sought to test a locally based approach to community development.

Our starting hypothesis

At the heart of the original model was a relatively simple proposition:



We wanted to understand whether, by creating stronger local connections between voluntary and community organisations, statutory partners and other community stakeholders, we could identify grassroots activity that might otherwise remain under the radar and then provide the right support to help it thrive.

The model was designed to test whether:

- **Local networks could help identify grassroots activity**, particularly smaller and volunteer-led groups supporting older people.
- **Bringing organisations and partners together locally would create stronger relationships**, enabling information, opportunities and community knowledge to be shared.

- **Community organisations would tell us what they needed**, allowing support to respond to local circumstances rather than being prescribed centrally.
- **Infrastructure support could strengthen community groups**, including help with governance, volunteering, safeguarding, communications and organisational development.
- **Small-scale grant investment could unlock or sustain community activity**, particularly where relatively modest resources could make a meaningful difference.
- **Local insight could inform programme development**, ensuring that investment was increasingly shaped by what communities themselves identified as important.

Creating local spaces for conversation

The original delivery model centred on establishing VCS Networks and Thriving Communities Working Groups within the programme areas.

Because North Dorset and Purbeck cover large geographical areas with distinct communities, a place-based approach was adopted rather than treating each as a single locality. Initial activity therefore focused on Weymouth, Sturminster Newton, Shaftesbury & Gillingham, Sherborne, Blandford, Swanage and Wareham.

To facilitate connection, VCD established locality-based VCS Networks to bring a range of people together from VCS organisations large and small, town & parish councils, health, care, education, and any local stakeholders interested in working with or supporting the local VCS to network, receive training, and learn about local services and support.

The Thriving Communities Working Groups were intended to work alongside, providing a focused space for discussion, collaboration and decision-making. They would bring together people with knowledge of their communities, help identify grassroots organisations and local needs, generate ideas and provide a route through which community voices could influence the developing programme.

Starting with relationships

A deliberate feature of the Foundation Phase was that the Thriving Communities grant opportunity was not initially promoted as a conventional open grant programme. Instead, the intention was to use local engagement and relationships to identify organisations and activities that could benefit from support. Conversations could then explore what an organisation was trying to achieve, what challenges it

faced and whether funding – or another form of support – would make the greatest difference. This was important because the programme was seeking to reach grassroots organisations that might not routinely respond to traditional funding opportunities.

The expectation was that local networks, introductions and existing community knowledge would help uncover these grassroots groups and create a pathway into wider support. The first year subsequently demonstrated that this assumption was only partially correct and that more proactive outreach into communities was required.

Testing assumptions, not delivering a fixed model

The Foundation Phase was therefore as much about learning how to support communities effectively as it was about delivering activity. Several assumptions sat behind the original model:

We wanted to test whether…	Why it mattered
Local networks could identify grassroots organisations	Many smaller groups are not visible through formal VCS structures
Groups would engage with a locality-based network	Networks could provide an efficient way to build relationships and share intelligence
Existing local knowledge could identify community assets	This could reduce the need for resource-intensive mapping and outreach
Funding would provide an incentive for organisations to engage	Small grants could enable activity to be tried, sustained or developed
Organisations would articulate their wider support needs	VCD could then provide proportionate infrastructure and development support
Local conversations could generate solutions	Communities themselves often hold the relationships, knowledge and assets needed to respond to local challenges

The importance of a Foundation Phase is that these assumptions could be tested in practice rather than accepted as fact.

A test-and-learn approach

We've been on a learning journey. That required us to listen to organisations, observe how different communities responded, understand what encouraged or

prevented engagement and be prepared to change the model when the evidence suggested a different approach was needed.

Some of our original assumptions were validated. Others were challenged. All were valuable.

The learning generated through this process has ultimately shaped our approach to Thriving Communities – one that places greater emphasis on relationships, community infrastructure, organisational capacity and collaboration, with funding as one of several tools available to support change.

4. What We Did

Turning the model into action

The first year of Thriving Communities focused on building the relationships, networks and delivery mechanisms needed to identify and support grassroots community activity across North Dorset, Purbeck and Weymouth.

Delivery combined locality-based engagement, direct conversations with community groups, partnership development, infrastructure support and the development of a flexible community grant programme.

Building local networks

The initial delivery model established VCS Networks and Thriving Communities Working Groups across the three programme areas. Recognising the size, rurality and different identities of communities within North Dorset and Purbeck, the programme adopted a more localised approach rather than expecting organisations to travel to, or work as, a single area-wide group.

Activity was therefore developed across:

North Dorset: Sturminster Newton, Shaftesbury & Gillingham, Sherborne, and Blandford

Purbeck: Swanage, and Wareham

Weymouth: Weymouth

The programme was initially launched through three webinars covering Weymouth, North Dorset and Purbeck. These introduced Thriving Communities, invited local organisations and partners to help identify grassroots activity, encouraged people to join the VCS Networks and began building the relationships required for delivery.

This was followed by a programme of in-person and online Working Groups, designed to provide regular opportunities for organisations and stakeholders to connect, discuss local issues, identify community activity and contribute to the development of Thriving Communities.

Creating opportunities for local conversation

The Working Groups were deliberately designed to be more than information-sharing meetings.

They provided a space to:

- **Connect** organisations and people working within the same communities.
- **Listen** to the experiences of grassroots organisations and volunteers.
- **Identify** activities and groups that may not otherwise be visible.
- **Understand** the barriers affecting local community activity.
- **Explore** opportunities for collaboration and practical support.
- **Inform** how Thriving Communities should develop.

Engagement varied considerably between areas. Weymouth established relatively strong engagement from the outset, benefiting from existing relationships, Volunteer Centre Dorset's other activity in the area and the foundations of Weymouth Town Council's established VCS network.

Across North Dorset, engagement was more varied. Separate activity in Blandford, Sherborne, Sturminster Newton and Shaftesbury & Gillingham enabled the programme to develop relationships across a large rural area, although awareness of VCD and our wider support offer, or engagement with other VCS infrastructure organisations was more dispersed.

In Purbeck, Wareham and Swanage were initially explored separately. Engagement with a standalone Thriving Communities Working Group was more limited, leading to conversations with existing local partners about how the programme could complement rather than duplicate established activity.

Going beyond the meetings

The networks were only one part of delivery. Alongside these meetings, the programme used one-to-one conversations, introductions, existing relationships and direct engagement to develop a better understanding of grassroots community activity. These conversations proved particularly valuable when engaging smaller volunteer-led groups. Forming trusted relationships with the volunteers delivering different provision has been foundational to then encourage further engagement.

They enabled the team to understand not simply what a group did, but:

- Who was keeping it going?
- Who participated?
- What challenges were emerging?
- Was the activity sustainable?
- What support would actually be useful?

These relationships also began to build a richer picture of community assets and challenges than could be obtained through organisational directories or formal datasets alone.

Providing support beyond funding

Although grant funding forms an important part of the overall programme, organisations engaging with Thriving Communities could also access Volunteer Centre Dorset's wider infrastructure support.

This meant that conversations could identify support around areas such as:

- Governance and organisational development
- Safeguarding
- Volunteer recruitment and development
- Communications and increasing visibility
- Referral pathways
- Training
- Partnership and collaboration
- Planning and sustainability

This became increasingly important as engagement progressed. The programme found that some organisations did not require additional funding at all, while others needed organisational support before funding could provide sustainable benefit.

This enabled Thriving Communities to begin moving away from a simple **"funding available → application → grant"** relationship towards a more developmental approach: **Conversation → Understand the need → Identify the right support → Connect, develop or invest.**

Developing a flexible community investment offer

Alongside community engagement and infrastructure support, the programme developed the **Thriving Communities Grant Fund** to enable appropriate investment in community-led activity.

The emerging **Try It, Do It, Grow It** model recognised that organisations may require investment for very different reasons:

- **Try It** – enabling a group to test a new idea or approach.
- **Do It** – helping sustain activity that is already working and making a difference.
- **Grow It** – supporting successful community activity to increase its reach or capacity.

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Try It

To give VCS groups the confidence and resources to try something new and learn what works

Seeding activities to test a new idea or innovative way that address an identified local need, supporting older people.



Do It

Grant funding to continue doing something that is already working well and making a difference

Helping established community groups, clubs and wellbeing activities to deliver quality activities that improve health, wellbeing and social connection for older people.



Grow It

Building capacity and resilience within exisiting successful community projects and groups

Scaling successful project that have demonstrated positive outcomes into new areas or communities, or increasing capacity to reach more people.

As delivery progressed, eligibility was broadened to better reflect the diversity of community activity encountered through the programme. Rather than relying primarily on organisational structure, greater emphasis was placed on the activity being delivered, the community benefit created and its alignment with Thriving Communities objectives.

While initially, there was ambition to have a grant panel in each locality, due to practicalities, a central Thriving Communities Grant Panel has been developed. This has provided consistency in decision-making, access to a broader range of expertise, improved management of conflicts of interest and reduced administrative duplication between localities. Representatives of the panel are from across all areas, and a range of sectors.

A flexible, conversation-led approach to community investment

The Thriving Communities Grant Fund was deliberately designed to be different from a traditional grant-making process. Rather than beginning with an application form, the process begins with a conversation. This enables us to understand the idea in context – the need it is responding to, the organisation's capacity, the resources already available within the community, the outcomes it hopes to achieve and what support would make the greatest difference.

Where appropriate, applicants are then invited to bring their idea to their local **Dorset Connect** network. This is an opportunity to share the idea with people and organisations who know the area and ask a broader question: **“What could this community bring to make this idea stronger?”**

The conversation may uncover local knowledge, volunteers, venues, equipment, expertise, introductions, partnerships or other resources that the applicant did not

know were available. It may identify another organisation already doing something similar or create an opportunity for collaboration. In some cases, this could reduce the amount of funding required; in others, it could significantly increase the reach, sustainability or impact of the original idea.

The grant therefore becomes one part of a wider community response, rather than the response itself.

The aim is not simply to fund a good idea, but to surround that idea with the relationships, assets and support that give it the best opportunity to succeed and become sustainable.

This approach also helps ensure that decisions are informed by local knowledge and community insight, while creating greater connection, and emotional investment between the organisations receiving investment and the communities in which they operate.

Evolving the network model

As the year progressed, we recognised that operating separate Thriving Communities Working Groups alongside the wider VCS Networks was creating unnecessary duplication. We also found that the term 'VCS Networks' was not widely understood, even among some of the community organisations we were trying to reach, potentially limiting participation.

This learning led to the development of **Dorset Connect** – a broader, neighbourhood-based network bringing together grassroots and community organisations, Town and Parish Councils, health and care partners, businesses and other local stakeholders.

Rather than expecting organisations and volunteers to attend multiple meetings, Dorset Connect provides a shared space to build relationships, exchange local knowledge, identify challenges and opportunities, and develop practical solutions together.

Importantly, the approach extends beyond the meetings themselves. Through ongoing communication, introductions and locality-based relationships, connections and collaboration can continue between gatherings, helping turn conversations into meaningful action.

Building reach and visibility

The revised approach was supported by more proactive communications and engagement. Thriving Communities and Dorset Connect were promoted through newsletters, social media, direct engagement and wider sector events. This was particularly important in areas where awareness of Volunteer Centre Dorset's new broader infrastructure role had previously been limited.

By the later stages of Year One, this increased visibility was beginning to generate wider enquiries for organisational support, including training, governance, planning, marketing and engagement support, alongside increased participation in Dorset Connect.

Year One at a Glance

CONNECT	ENGAGE	INVEST
9 local networks	**93** organisations engaged	**£6,100** application value
40 network sessions	**331** participants	**5** grant applications
6 sectors represented	**20** 1:1 conversations	**67** activities enabled

Behind every number is a relationship: an organisation identified, a conversation started, a connection made, a challenge understood or an opportunity unlocked.

Year One: Our Reach, Activity and Early Outcomes

During Year One, Thriving Communities focused on establishing local relationships, identifying grassroots community activity and developing practical ways to strengthen the organisations supporting older residents across North Dorset, Purbeck and Weymouth.

The figures provide an overview of programme delivery and engagement. Importantly, they represent different types of activity, from establishing networks and engaging organisations to providing individual support and developing community investment opportunities. They should therefore be considered alongside the examples of change described throughout this report.

9 Local Networks – Building Connections Across Communities
Thriving Communities established and developed locality-based engagement across its three Foundation Phase areas. The localities identified in the original delivery

programme included Weymouth, Blandford, Sherborne, Sturminster Newton, Shaftesbury and Gillingham, Wareham and Swanage. These networks provided opportunities for voluntary and community organisations, local councils, health and care professionals and other stakeholders to meet each other, share knowledge, identify challenges and develop working relationships. Additional networks have been created in other areas, eg Dorchester and East Dorset, as part of wider VCS support provision, in preparation for potential Thriving Communities expansion.

93 Organisations Engaged – Increasing Awareness and Connections
Across Year One, 93 organisations engaged through programme activity, providing opportunities to share information, strengthen relationships and identify practical support needs. Engagement included voluntary and community organisations, statutory partners and other local stakeholders. Of particular importance was identifying smaller, volunteer-led and informal groups that may not previously have been connected to wider infrastructure support.

331 Participants – Bringing People and Organisations Together
Year One recorded 331 participants through network meetings and associated engagement activity. These opportunities brought together people working in or supporting local communities, enabling them to share information, develop connections, identify resources and explore practical solutions. The programme increasingly focused on ensuring that participation led to useful outcomes, rather than treating attendance alone as a measure of success.

20 One-to-One Conversations – Understanding Needs and Providing Practical Support
Alongside wider network engagement, VCD visited 20 community organisations and local stakeholders for one-to-one conversations. These conversations enabled a more detailed understanding of the circumstances of individual groups, including their strengths, ambitions, organisational challenges and sustainability. Issues explored included volunteer recruitment and succession, governance, financial arrangements, visibility, participation, referral pathways and opportunities for collaboration. Year Two will strengthen the recording of actions and follow-up outcomes so that the practical difference resulting from these conversations can be demonstrated.

5 Grant Applications – £6,100 Requested
The Try It, Do It, Grow It community investment model generated five grant applications with a combined requested value of £6,100. The applications included support for a community café in Wool, Bishops Caundle Community Shop and Hub, Love Dogs & the Environment West Dorset, Swanage Linking Lives and Vale Family Hub's Young at Heart Lunch Club. The proposals addressed a range of locally identified needs, including improving the visibility of community activities, supporting digital inclusion, replacing essential equipment, enabling accessible transport and developing new opportunities for social connection.

67 Activities Enabled – Supporting Community Participation
The programme recorded 67 activities associated with its community investment and support activity. These activities reflect the potential for relatively modest investment and practical assistance to sustain existing provision, test new ideas and create opportunities for social connection.

What These Figures Tell Us

The first year has established an important foundation of relationships, engagement and community investment opportunities. However, the value of Thriving Communities cannot be measured solely through the number of meetings, organisations, participants or grant applications.

The emerging evidence of change is found in the practical outcomes of those relationships: improved referral pathways, organisations overcoming barriers to development, existing community activities becoming more visible and groups accessing support that responds to their circumstances.

Year Two will build on this foundation by recording not only what the programme delivers, but what changes for organisations and residents as a result. This will provide a clearer understanding of the contribution Thriving Communities makes to stronger, more connected and sustainable community provision.

5. What We Learned

Listening to communities changed our understanding

The Foundation Phase was designed to test how grassroots community organisations could best be identified, connected, supported and strengthened. One of its most important outcomes has therefore been the learning generated through delivery.

Direct engagement challenged some of our original assumptions. It demonstrated that grassroots community activity is often less visible, less formal and yet more self-sufficient than traditional models of VCS engagement might suggest. It also showed that the challenges affecting sustainability are frequently more complex than a lack of funding.

Most importantly, the first year reinforced the need to start with the organisation and its community, rather than with a predetermined intervention.

1. Some of Dorset's most valuable community activity flies under the radar

Many of the grassroots groups encountered through Thriving Communities are invisible to ‘the system’, and they did not necessarily identify themselves as part of the voluntary and community sector (VCS). They were often operating independently, with no connection to infrastructure organisations or wider networks and limited or no awareness of the support available to them.

Some were small friendship, lunch, coffee or activity groups that had developed organically because local people recognised a need and decided to do something about it.

These groups can be difficult to identify through traditional databases, mailing lists or established networks. Indeed, one of the programme's original assumptions was that existing local knowledge and networks would naturally lead us to these groups. In practice, this was only partially achieved and greater one-to-one identification and outreach is still required in Phase Two.

What this means: If we want to understand community capacity, we cannot rely solely on the organisations already known to us. Effective community development requires active relationship-building and a willingness to seek out activity happening outside formal structures. This will require more considerable resources to spend time in communities.

2. Funding is important – but money is not always the answer

One of the clearest findings from Year One was that financial need was not always the primary challenge facing grassroots groups. Some groups operate with remarkably little money. Activities may be supported through small attendance charges, donations, raffles, low-cost venues or contributions from local businesses. Some groups we encountered were financially self-sufficient and had little interest in or need to apply for grant funding.

Their challenges were different. They included attracting volunteers, succession planning, declining participation, governance, safeguarding, increasing awareness of their activity, improving referral pathways and overcoming transport barriers. A short-term grant might help an organisation continue an activity for a period, but it would not necessarily address the underlying issue threatening its sustainability.

What this means: Community investment is most effective when funding sits alongside organisational development, connections, volunteer support, knowledge and practical assistance.

3. Community capacity can be both powerful and fragile

The programme encountered activities that have been sustained for many years through the commitment of a very small number of volunteers. This represents an enormous community asset – but also a vulnerability.

Where an activity depends on one or two people, the retirement, ill health or changing circumstances of those individuals can put the entire activity at risk. In many cases, there is no formal succession plan and limited capacity to recruit or develop the next generation of volunteers.

This is particularly important when considering preventative community infrastructure. A longstanding lunch club, friendship group or social activity may appear stable because it has existed for many years, while in reality its future may depend upon a handful of individuals.

What this means: Supporting community resilience requires attention not only to what exists today, but to the people, skills, governance and succession arrangements that will enable it to exist tomorrow. Engagement needs to be sensitive, in-person, and relationship-based.

4. Not every organisation wants to grow

Traditional funding and development models can sometimes assume that successful organisations should increase their reach, income, activities or geographical footprint. Our engagement demonstrated that this is not necessarily what grassroots groups want.

Some are intentionally small. They exist to serve a particular community or group of people and are content with their current scale. Some are self-financing and have no ambition to become more formalised or significantly increase their activity. Obviously, that does not make their contribution less valuable.

For a small friendship group, success may mean continuing to provide companionship to the same group of older residents. For another organisation, it may mean recruiting two new volunteers so that an existing activity can continue. Formalisation can create a barrier - most groups don't want to develop complex governance, open bank accounts, have policies and procedures or receive training. Support needs to be proportionate.

What this means: Our approach needs to recognise sustainability, resilience and community value alongside growth. Support should be proportionate to the ambitions and circumstances of the organisation.

5. Engagement has to offer a clear purpose

The original model anticipated separate Thriving Communities Working Groups operating alongside wider VCS networks. In practice, many organisations and partners were already being invited to multiple meetings, networks and advisory groups – or just have busy lives – or are simply not interested, and only want to deliver their service.

For smaller organisations in particular, attending another meeting places additional pressure on limited capacity and frontline delivery. A simple but important message emerged from our conversations: ***People are busy. They want to "do the doing" and only get further involved if there is a clear purpose.***

Engagement therefore needs to provide tangible value. People need to make useful connections, solve problems, discover opportunities, access support or contribute to something that matters to their community. This learning was a significant driver behind integrating Thriving Communities into Dorset Connect, thereby reducing duplication and creating a broader space for meaningful local engagement.

What this means: We should measure the success of community networks not simply by attendance, but by what happens because people attended. Dorset Connect engagement should ensure that people have something to contribute, as much as something to take away.

6. Different communities require different approaches

Delivery varied considerably between the programme areas. Weymouth established stronger engagement relatively quickly, supported by existing relationships, Volunteer Centre Dorset's presence through other programmes, a vibrant VCS, and an established local VCS network operated by Weymouth Town Council.

North Dorset presented different challenges. Its rural geography required activity across several distinct localities, while awareness of VCD as a wider infrastructure organisation, beyond volunteer support, was lower and relationships needed to be developed. Purbeck again required a different response, with limited engagement in a standalone Working Group leading to discussions about aligning with existing local activity that could modify, rather than creating duplication.

Across all areas, rurality matters - transport and geography affect participation, volunteering and access to activities.

What this means: A single delivery model cannot simply be replicated across Dorset. Effective neighbourhood working needs to recognise existing relationships, geography, identity, infrastructure and local capacity – building on what already exists rather than automatically creating something new.

7. Trust and relationships are infrastructure too

Grassroots community development depends upon trust. We have therefore established a position of “Moving at the pace of trust”. Some of the organisations encountered were cautious about “interference”, formal structures, external organisations and offers of support. Many had successfully operated independently for years and did not necessarily perceive a need for outside involvement. Engagement therefore required careful, sensitive, one-to-one conversations and reassurance that support would not mean imposing unnecessary processes or changing what already worked.

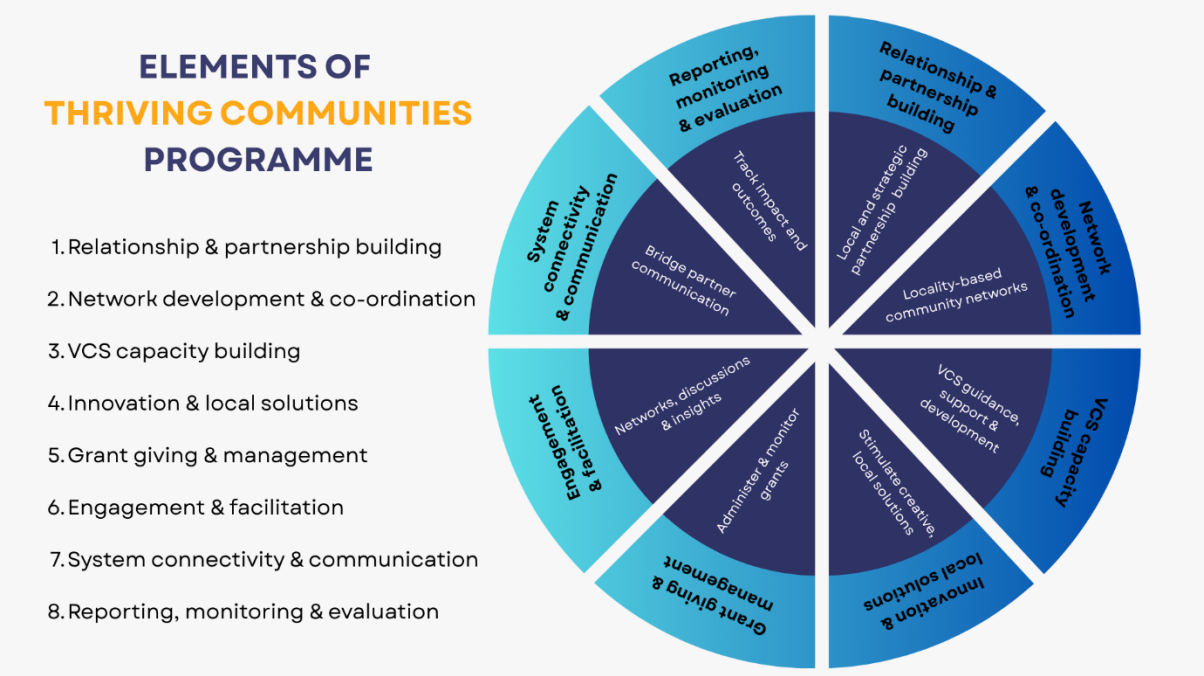
This takes time. Some groups require repeated conversations and reassurance before they will engage with any infrastructure support. We ensure we are ‘meeting groups where they are at’, and helping solve problems that matter to them. Building relationships this way has created something valuable beyond the infrastructure support: a connection through which organisations can ask for help, hear about opportunities, meet potential partners and contribute their knowledge of their community – identifying that they too have more to offer than they think.

What this means: Relationships should not simply be viewed as the route through which the programme delivers its work. Building trusted relationships is itself part of building community infrastructure, with extensive opportunities for wider community insight.

8. From learning to a stronger model

Taken together, these findings have clarified our understanding of what is required to build thriving communities. We started with a model that placed significant emphasis on networks and grant funding. What has emerged was a need for a broader programme – with equal emphasis on all parts:

Relationships + Connections + Organisational Support + Community Intelligence + Collaboration + Investment



Thriving Communities is evolving from a programme that primarily sought to identify groups and fund activity into one that seeks to identify, connect and strengthen community assets – and then use funding where investment can add the greatest value.

This is the foundation upon which the next phase of the programme can now build.

9. Testing Our Assumptions

The Foundation Phase gave us an opportunity to test original assumptions against the reality of voluntary and community activity across Dorset. Some assumptions were validated, while others were challenged or proved more complex than anticipated.

The most significant shift was recognising that grassroots community capacity cannot simply be identified and strengthened through networks and grant funding. It requires active outreach, trusted relationships, proportionate organisational support and an understanding of the different assets and challenges within each community.

What did we test?

Our original assumption	What we found	What this means for delivery
Local networks would naturally identify and	Partially. Existing networks provided a valuable starting	Networks need to be complemented by proactive

Our original assumption	What we found	What this means for delivery
connect grassroots organisations.	point, but many smaller volunteer-led groups remained outside them and were difficult to identify.	outreach, local relationships, introductions and one-to-one engagement.
Groups supporting older people would be attracted by grant funding.	Not always. Some groups were financially self-sufficient or had relatively modest financial needs. Funding was frequently not their greatest challenge.	Funding should be one tool within a wider support offer rather than the starting point for every conversation.
Grassroots organisations would engage with a formal network structure.	Engagement was mixed and varied considerably between localities. Smaller organisations in particular had limited capacity or appetite for additional meetings.	Engagement needs to be simple, accessible and clearly worthwhile. This directly informed the integration of Thriving Communities into Dorset Connect.
Existing local knowledge would enable us to identify priority groups.	Local knowledge was valuable but incomplete. Further direct engagement was required to find organisations operating outside established relationships.	Community mapping cannot be a one-off exercise. Identifying community assets needs to be an ongoing, relationship-led process.
Existing information sources would provide a good picture of community provision.	They provided a starting point, but there was no single reliable source identifying the breadth of informal and volunteer-led community activity.	Dorset Connect and ongoing community engagement can help build a richer and more current picture of local assets, needs and gaps.
Funding would strengthen community activity.	Yes – where finance was the barrier. However, sustainability was often influenced just as strongly by volunteers, succession, governance, participation, visibility and transport.	Investment needs to combine financial support with infrastructure support, connections and organisational development.

Our original assumption	What we found	What this means for delivery
A common approach could be applied across the programme areas.	Different localities responded differently depending on geography, existing infrastructure, relationships and awareness of VCD.	Delivery needs to remain place-based and adaptable, building on existing community infrastructure rather than imposing a uniform model.

PART TWO: WHAT WE BUILT

6. The Thriving Communities Model

Building the conditions in which communities can thrive

The Foundation Phase has developed Thriving Communities from its original focus on networks and grants into a broader community infrastructure model. It brings together relationships, local intelligence, organisational support, community assets, pathways into provision, collaboration and targeted investment. Rather than treating these as separate interventions, the model connects them around the needs and opportunities within each community.

At its heart is a simple principle: Start with the community, understand what already exists and what is needed, then bring together the relationships, resources, support and investment that can make the greatest difference.

The model recognises that communities already hold significant assets – people, organisations, volunteers, places, knowledge, skills, relationships and ideas. Thriving Communities provides the infrastructure to connect, strengthen and mobilise those assets, while investing where additional resources can unlock greater community benefit.

A connected model

Thriving Communities brings together six interconnected elements:

CONNECT — Building relationships and local networks

Dorset Connect provides the neighbourhood infrastructure through which organisations and partners can build relationships, understand what is happening

locally and identify opportunities to work together. It connects grassroots organisations with the wider VCS, health and care, Town and Parish Councils, public services, businesses and other community stakeholders – creating relationships through which information, resources, referrals, opportunities and collaborative solutions can flow.

UNDERSTAND — Building community intelligence

Relationships create a richer understanding of communities: what provision exists, where there are gaps, what organisations and residents are experiencing, where capacity may be vulnerable and what opportunities are emerging. Dorset Connect, direct engagement and one-to-one relationships create a two-way flow of community intelligence, enabling local insight to inform support, collaboration and investment while connecting communities with wider opportunities and developments.

STRENGTHEN — Building capacity and resilience

Support is proportionate to the organisation and what it is trying to achieve. This can range from a conversation or introduction through to support with governance, safeguarding, volunteering, organisational development, sustainability, communications or collaboration. The aim is not to make every organisation bigger or more formal, but to help valuable community provision become as strong and sustainable as it needs to be to fulfil its purpose.

REACH — Connecting people to community provision

Community provision achieves its greatest value when people can find and access it. Thriving Communities therefore strengthens the connections between community provision, residents and the professionals supporting them. Better visibility, communications and relationships with health, care and other services can create stronger pathways into local activity and support.

COLLABORATE — Mobilising community assets

Connecting people around local opportunities enables communities to make better use of the assets already available – including volunteers, venues, knowledge, expertise, equipment, communications channels and partnerships. Dorset Connect provides a mechanism for bringing these assets together, supporting collaboration and strengthening community-led responses before assuming that additional funding is the only solution.

INVEST — Targeted funding where it adds value

Investment remains an important part of Thriving Communities, but sits within this wider model.

The ‘Try It, Do It, Grow It’ grant model provides a flexible framework for testing new ideas, sustaining valuable existing activity and developing successful approaches

where there is further need or opportunity. Investment can therefore sit alongside community assets, connections and organisational support to strengthen its reach, value and sustainability.

One model, different routes in

The model is deliberately connected rather than linear. An organisation might first engage through Dorset Connect, a grant enquiry, an introduction, a governance question or a conversation with VCD. From there, different elements of the model can be brought together according to the organisation, opportunity or locality.



The strength of the model is in the relationship between these elements. Connections generate intelligence; intelligence informs support and investment; stronger organisations become more visible and accessible; collaboration mobilises additional assets; and targeted investment can unlock further community capacity.

Thriving Communities is a connected model for strengthening the infrastructure around community activity – enabling valuable provision to be found, connected, strengthened, accessed and sustained.

7. Dorset Connect: Creating the Connection Infrastructure

Connecting people, organisations and opportunities at neighbourhood level

The Foundation Phase reinforced that strong communities depend upon strong connections. Grassroots organisations can often operate in isolation – but their ability to thrive can depend upon relationships with other community groups, volunteers, Town and Parish Councils, health and care professionals, businesses, public services and the people who live within their communities.

Yet these connections do not always happen naturally. Dorset Connect provides the infrastructure to help make them happen. Developed from the learning of the original VCS Networks and Thriving Communities Working Groups, Dorset Connect creates a shared neighbourhood space where different sectors can come together around the communities they serve, with a membership that is deliberately broad and inclusive.

Its purpose is to:

- Connect people
- Surface community intelligence
- Connect organisations with support
- Create collaborations
- Connect statutory partners with communities
- Inform participants through news updates or micro-training
- Identify challenges
- Uncover opportunities
- Solve problems
- **Take action**



More than a VCS network

While we continue to primarily focus on bringing the voluntary and community organisations together, Dorset Connect deliberately widens the room. Depending on the locality, participants can include grassroots and volunteer-led groups, larger VCS organisations, Town and Parish Councils, health and care, education, housing, businesses, faith organisations, arts and culture, sports and leisure, community leaders and other local stakeholders.

This breadth matters because communities do not experience challenges according to organisational or sector boundaries. A community organisation may need volunteers – a local business may have employees looking for volunteering opportunities. A lunch club may need a venue – a local organisation may have underused space. A health professional may be supporting someone experiencing isolation – a community group nearby may provide exactly the social connection that person needs. A grassroots organisation may have an idea but lack equipment, expertise or communications capacity – another person in the room may be able to provide it.

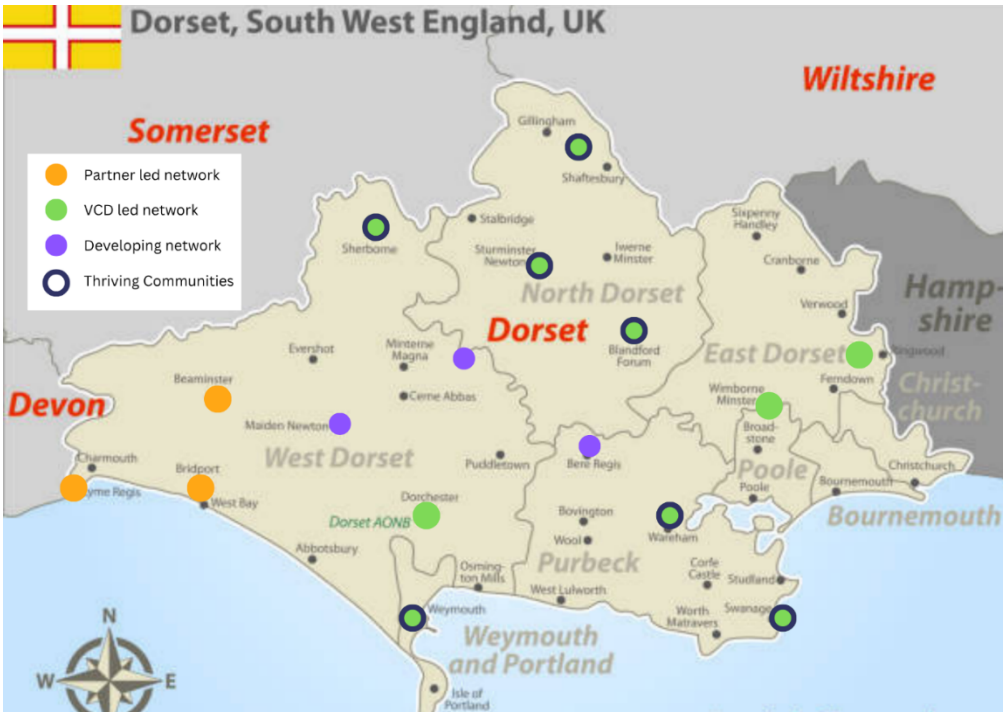
Dorset Connect creates the environment in which those connections are more likely to happen.

A neighbourhood approach

Dorset Connect operates at a locality level, recognising that Dorset is made up of distinct communities with different identities, assets, challenges and relationships. The network is therefore not intended to impose a standard agenda across the

county. Each locality can develop around the issues and opportunities that matter locally, while remaining connected to a wider Dorset infrastructure.

The network footprint is developed across North Dorset, Dorchester, Weymouth, Purbeck and East Dorset, with further locations being explored where there was a clear need and where new activity would complement rather than duplicate existing local arrangements. Where good local infrastructure already exists, we will connect with it. Where there is a gap, we can help build it.



What happens through Dorset Connect?

Dorset Connect meetings provide an opportunity to meet quarterly in-person to share, connect, explore, collaborate and act. Organisations can share what they are working on, identify challenges, ask for help, hear about local activity and discover opportunities that they may otherwise never encounter. But we don't want the value of Dorset Connect to be limited to the meeting itself.

Relationships continue through introductions, one-to-one conversations, ongoing communication and practical follow-up. The evolving model continues contact between the quarterly in-person meetings, with an online meeting, so that opportunities and collaboration are not dependent upon waiting for the next formal gathering, and others who cannot attend in person are welcomed online. Recently created Whatsapp groups, are another way that group members are staying connected and involved between meetings – reaching out to their community for support or with updates.

In both formats, news and updates are shared from statutory partners and the wider sector, along with developments that are important and specific to the locality. Micro-training is a feature which enables us to share quick wins to help improve social media engagement, volunteer recruitment, safeguarding procedures, business planning, etc – and this is used to whet the appetite of attendees to then enquire about further support, or book a full training session.

We have developed an 'Ask One', 'Give One' wall, where everyone adds post-it notes with contributions (see samples in Appendix). These are shared by email after the event giving everyone equal opportunity to follow up on opportunities that are valuable to them. During a post-event debrief, the VCD team identify opportunities and connections beyond the participants, and follow these through. The 'bring a challenge' segment incorporates Thriving Communities, enabling a group or individual to speak to the room. This can be because the group would like to apply for Thriving Communities funding, or just because they want the help and support of their community. This has raised some vibrant conversations, created ideas, connections, and opportunities, that would not have otherwise been identified.

By attending Dorset Connect, we want people to leave:

- **better connected** – knowing people and organisations they did not know before;
- **better informed** – understanding more about their community, local provision and opportunities; or
- **better equipped** – with a connection, resource, idea or next step that helps them take action.

Increasingly, the test of a successful network is not about how many people attended, but the quality of the participation and actions that follow.

Mobilising community assets

Dorset Connect and 'Ask One', Give One' are central to the programme's approach to community asset mobilisation. Every community contains assets that extend far beyond financial resources:

- **People** with skills, experience and enthusiasm.
- **Volunteers** willing to contribute time.
- **Places** where activity can happen.
- **Organisations** with knowledge, capacity and reach.
- **Businesses** with expertise, resources and networks.
- **Relationships** that enable things to happen.
- **Local knowledge** about what communities need and what already works.

The challenge is that these assets are not always visible or connected – therefore Dorset Connect provides a mechanism for bringing them together. This is particularly important within the Thriving Communities grant model where an organisation bringing an idea forward can share it with its local network, creating an opportunity to

identify support and resources before funding is considered in isolation. The result may be a new partnership, access to a venue, volunteers, equipment, specialist knowledge, greater visibility or an introduction to another organisation.

In this way, Dorset Connect can help increase the value of financial investment while strengthening local ownership and resilience.

See Samples of Ask One, Give One in Appendix.

Creating pathways into community support

Dorset Connect also has the potential to address another important challenge identified through the Foundation Phase: good community provision is only valuable if people know it exists and can access it. By bringing community organisations into closer contact with health, care and other professionals, the network can improve awareness of the activities and support available locally. This can help develop stronger informal and formal pathways between Health & Care, Community Provision, Residents – and is more impactful than a flyer, poster or email.

The relationship works in both directions, with professionals building confidence to connect people into community activity, while grassroots organisations can better understand wider services and know where to direct someone when their needs extend beyond what the organisation can provide.

For Thriving Communities, this is an important part of the prevention ambition: connecting people with appropriate community support earlier and making better use of the provision that already exists.

Creating a flow of community intelligence

Dorset Connect also creates a regular flow of community intelligence. Grassroots organisations and local leaders often see changes within communities before those changes appear in formal datasets. They hear when attendance is declining, when transport has become a barrier, when volunteers are becoming exhausted, when a new group of residents is struggling or when demand for a particular type of support is increasing.

Bringing those voices together provides an opportunity to identify: emerging needs and pressures; gaps in provision; vulnerable community activity; duplication; opportunities for collaboration; local assets that are underused; and ideas emerging directly from communities. It will also importantly shine a light on ‘what’s working well’, and help us all understand why.

This intelligence can inform not only Thriving Communities, but potentially wider conversations about prevention, neighbourhood working and community investment.

Equally, information can flow in the other direction – enabling local organisations to better understand wider strategies, services, funding opportunities and developments that may affect their communities. Dorset Connect therefore creates a two-way bridge between communities and the wider system.

From networking to action

Ultimately, the success of Dorset Connect should be judged by what happens because people are connected. The ambition has been to move beyond a regular network: **Meeting → Conversation → Meeting** and towards: **Connection → Opportunity → Collaboration → Action.**

This might mean two organisations developing something together, a professional discovering a community service they then refer into, a group finding volunteers, an organisation accessing infrastructure support, a local challenge being collectively addressed or an idea progressing into the Thriving Communities investment pathway.

Over time, these individual connections create something bigger: a stronger and more connected community infrastructure. Dorset Connect is an integral part of the infrastructure that enables Thriving Communities to happen.

Building the infrastructure for prevention

Prevention begins in communities – through friendship, activity, volunteering, practical support, information, self-activation, belonging and connection within a community. But those community assets need an infrastructure around them if they are to be visible, accessible, connected and sustainable.

Dorset Connect provides that connective infrastructure. It creates the relationships through which community assets can be identified and mobilised; the intelligence through which needs and gaps can be understood; the connections through which residents can reach local provision; and the partnerships through which communities can develop their own responses.

If Thriving Communities is the model, Dorset Connect is the connective tissue – linking people, organisations, resources and opportunities so that communities are better able to support their residents and contribute to prevention.

8. The ‘Try It. Do It. Grow It.’ Grant Model

Flexible investment for community-led solutions

Grant funding for grassroots VCS groups to be able to continue or expand their provision for older residents is an important part of the Thriving Communities model. Rather than operating a traditional grant programme in which organisations respond to a funding opportunity through a written application process, the **Try It, Do It, Grow It** approach provides a simple framework for investing in community activity at different stages of its development.

A simple framework with a wider purpose







TRY IT	DO IT	GROW IT
Test something new	**Sustain something valuable**	**Develop something proven**
Respond to an idea, gap or opportunity	Protect activity communities already value	Increase reach, accessibility, capacity or resilience
Test → Learn	**Continue → Strengthen**	**Develop → Sustain**

The funding is flexible, and the purpose is consistent. To help communities turn local ideas and existing assets into sustainable activity that strengthens connection, wellbeing and independence.

Further details of each funding element and governance are included in the Appendix.

The approach recognises that community groups need different things at different times. A new idea may need a small amount of funding to test whether it works. An established activity may simply need help to continue. Another may have demonstrated its value and be ready to reach more people.

More than three grant categories

A Try It, Do It, Grow It grant starts with a conversation. Rather than asking an organisation to immediately demonstrate how it fits predetermined funding criteria, completing forms and submitting documents, a conversation can help us first understand:

- What are they trying to achieve?
- What need or opportunity have they identified?
- What already exists within the community?
- Who could they work with?
- What resources or assets are already available?
- What is getting in the way?
- What would make the greatest difference?

That conversation might uncover a range of support needs – of which one may be funding. But it may also uncover a need for volunteers, communication support, a venue, governance advice, marketing, training; while opening the door to wider support opportunities including an introduction, partnerships, professional referrals or collaboration with another organisation or even donations.

This is why the Try It, Do It, Grow It model works most effectively, embedded within Dorset Connect and the wider Thriving Communities model, rather than as a standalone grant programme.

Bringing the community into the investment process

Where appropriate, potential applicants will bring their idea to **Dorset Connect** as part of the application process; and before taking an application to panel. This creates an opportunity to put local knowledge around the proposal. Rather than a focus on asking only: **“Should we fund this?”** the wider conversation can ask: **“What could we collectively bring to help make this work?”**

People in the room may identify a venue, volunteers, equipment, expertise, referral routes, communications channels, another funding source or an organisation interested in collaborating. This can strengthen the proposal, avoid unnecessary duplication and potentially reduce the amount of grant funding required. Importantly, it also begins building the relationships around an activity before the money is awarded, increasing the likelihood that those relationships and interest continue after the grant has been spent.

Making every pound work harder

This approach changes the role of the grant. Rather than funding being the beginning and end of the relationship, it becomes one resource amongst many that can be mobilised around a community idea. For example:

Traditional approach: Application → Assessment → Grant → Activity → End of grant

Thriving Communities approach: Conversation → Community insight → Connections & assets → Support + Investment → Activity → Relationships & sustainability

The ambition is to increase the value and longevity of the investment made. Where an organisation can combine a grant with volunteers, partnerships, local assets, in-kind support and stronger referral pathways, the resulting activity has the potential to become more resilient and less dependent upon repeated grant funding alone. Involving their Dorset Connect community, will organically create ongoing engagement, interest and buy in from wider community partners.

Investment that reflects community value

The Foundation Phase has also encouraged us to look beyond organisational labels when considering where community value is created. A charity, CIC, informal community group or other provider; like a sole trader; may deliver very similar activity to the same population. The distinction may lie only in governance, ownership and how income or surplus is ultimately used.

Our developing approach therefore considers not only what type of organisation is applying, but:

- What activity will be delivered?
- Who will benefit?
- What community need or opportunity does it address?
- Where will the benefit of the investment ultimately sit?
- How will public or charitable investment be appropriately protected?

This enables Thriving Communities to recognise valuable community provision while maintaining proportionate safeguards around the use of funding.

9. Bring It to Life

Meeting groups where they are

‘Meeting groups where they are’ has started to have meaning both in terms of geography, and where they are in their development journey. One of the most encouraging responses to Thriving Communities and Dorset Connect has been the appreciation expressed by organisations that we are taking the time to visit them in their own communities, rather than expecting them to come to us.

This has been particularly meaningful in rural areas such as North Dorset and Purbeck, where geographical isolation has contributed to strong, self-reliant communities with established local relationships and ways of working. By being present, listening and understanding local circumstances, we are building connections with groups that have often felt distant from wider systems and support networks.

The feedback has reinforced that being visible, accessible and willing to listen is valuable in itself. Organisations have welcomed the opportunity to share their experiences, challenges and ambitions with people who have made the effort to understand their community.

This relationship-led approach recognises that communities are different, local knowledge matters, and effective support must reflect the strengths and circumstances of each place. By meeting groups where they are, we are building the trust and relationships that enable more meaningful collaboration and lasting community connections.

Conversations in the Community

Dorset Connect is creating opportunities for conversations that lead to practical solutions and stronger partnerships. We have experienced that:

- Conversations often uncover underlying challenges that are not immediately visible.
- Bringing together different perspectives helps organisations explore solutions they may not have considered on their own.
- The first issue presented is not always the barrier that needs addressing most urgently.
- Early support and signposting can help organisations build stronger foundations for future growth.
- Sometimes progress is not about delivering a project immediately, but about removing obstacles that would prevent future development.
- Organisations are increasingly thinking about how existing community assets and services can evolve to meet changing needs within their communities.

During Phase One, we have been party to many conversations, both collectively and 1:1. Here is a flavour of what we are hearing:

Example Conversation 1: Conversations That Lead to Action

At a network meeting in North Dorset, a volunteer-led singing group supporting people living with dementia and their carers, highlighted a lack of new members

joining, and that they receive no referrals from local GP practices. An NHS representative present identified a barrier for people not yet formally diagnosed being signposted, and recognised the opportunity to strengthen referral pathways. Subsequent conversations resulted in the group then receiving referrals from local GP services, increasing attendance and helping more people access support earlier, even prior to diagnosis. The discussion also opened up opportunities to improve the group's visibility and longer-term sustainability, including promotional materials and potential support from local businesses and community partners. What began as a conversation about referrals became an opportunity to strengthen connections, increase access to community support and explore longer-term sustainability.

Example Conversation 2: Looking Beyond the Presenting Challenge

An organisation successfully delivering farm-based activities for young people wanted to explore extending its offer to older people, including those living with dementia or Parkinson's. Initial conversations through Dorset Connect focused on improving accessibility for people with reduced mobility. Local partners suggested practical solutions, including specialist advice and potential support from businesses. However, further discussions revealed a more fundamental barrier: the organisation did not have a formal lease for the land it occupied, and other foundational governance issues limiting its ability to secure funding for future development. Through signposting to specialist legal support, the organisation was able to formalise its land arrangements and secure a lease, putting it in a stronger position to pursue funding and develop its plans.

What began as a conversation about accessibility uncovered a more significant challenge. By looking beyond the presenting issue, we helped the organisation address a fundamental barrier to its future development.

Example Conversation 3: Understanding Informal Community Groups

One practical challenge identified through conversation with a bereavement support group, was managing small amounts of money raised through raffles and social activities, and the disproportionate burden of bank fees. They had been operating for over 15 years, without a formal constitution or charitable status, but have found accessing suitable banking arrangements to be difficult or disproportionately expensive. Conversations helped groups explore more proportionate approaches, for the small amounts of money, including operating activities on a largely cost-neutral basis. We helped them think differently about how they raise money, where they keep it, service user contributions, and a sustainable funding model that meant not asking for a grant to pay for bank fees. These conversations reinforce that community value is not determined by organisational size or structure. Sometimes the most appropriate support is simply practical advice, a trusted relationship and an understanding of what a group needs to continue doing what it does well.

Example Conversation 4: Recognising and Supporting What Already Works

A volunteer-led lunch club in Weymouth demonstrates how strong local partnerships can sustain valuable community activity, sometimes without external funding. Operating from a church venue provided free of charge, the club offers affordable meals and social connection, supported by volunteers and a local fish and chip supplier providing meals at cost price. The group also benefits from the church's existing governance, safeguarding and volunteer support arrangements. The club was not seeking funding or expansion, and its existing arrangements were working well. They just wanted some reassurance they were ‘getting it right’. Our conversations therefore focused on where

Thriving Communities could add value, particularly by raising awareness of the club among social prescribing teams, primary care and wider community networks. Sometimes the greatest value lies not in creating or changing provision, but in recognising what already works, offering reassurance, strengthening connections and helping more people benefit.

Example Conversation 5: Looking Beyond Funding Requests
A long-established community group in North Dorset initially approached Thriving Communities seeking funding support. However, conversations revealed that the group already had a sustainable financial model, supported by membership contributions and a local town council grant.
The more pressing concern was attracting and welcoming new members. While the group had strong, established friendships, organisers recognised that newcomers could find it difficult to feel included, potentially limiting the group's longer-term sustainability. Our discussions explored simple approaches to improve the experience of new attendees, including a buddy system to help people feel welcomed and supported from their first visit. We also highlighted wider resources, other examples from across the county and support available should it be needed. This example demonstrates that sustainability is not always about funding. Sometimes a conversation and a few practical ideas can help an organisation address barriers to participation and strengthen its future.

What These Examples Demonstrate

Lots of conversations happen, and sadly, we don't get to be party to all of them, we never get to know all the connections and outcomes, and we don't see when independently, people quietly go and act on things they have heard. But together, these examples illustrate how Thriving Communities is translating relationships and local knowledge into practical support and opportunities for stronger community provision.

We now know that:

- **Local presence builds trust.** Meeting organisations in their own communities helps us reach groups that may otherwise remain disconnected from wider networks and support.
- **The presenting issue is not always the underlying challenge.** Conversations can reveal barriers and opportunities that would not emerge through a funding application or standard support offer.
- **Sustainability is about more than funding.** Volunteer capacity, succession, participation, governance, visibility and partnerships can be just as important to an organisation's future.
- **Not every organisation needs to grow or formalise.** Small, informal groups make an important contribution to community wellbeing, and support should reflect their purpose, ambitions and capacity.
- **Existing community assets are a valuable starting point.** Volunteers, venues, local businesses and established partnerships can often provide solutions without additional financial investment.
- **Connections can lead to tangible outcomes.** Stronger referral pathways, greater visibility and practical collaboration can help more people access valuable community activity.
- **Small interventions can make a meaningful difference.** An introduction, specialist advice or a conversation can help organisations overcome barriers and strengthen their resilience.

The common thread is that Thriving Communities adds value by understanding what already exists, identifying what will make the greatest difference and connecting organisations with the people, resources and opportunities that can help them thrive.

Community Intelligence: What Dorset Is Telling Us

Beyond the individual conversations, connections and grants, Thriving Communities is beginning to build something equally valuable: a deeper understanding of what is happening within Dorset's communities. Through Dorset Connect, direct engagement and relationships with grassroots organisations, we are hearing about challenges, changes and opportunities that may not be visible through formal data or established networks.

Community groups and volunteers often have detailed knowledge of their local areas. They notice when attendance is changing, when volunteers are struggling, when residents are finding it harder to participate or when an activity is at risk. They also know what is working well, where there is untapped potential and what their communities already have to offer. This is community intelligence: local knowledge and experience that can help us understand not just what provision exists, but how well it is working, how resilient it is and what might make a difference.

The Foundation Phase has not undertaken a comprehensive assessment of community need. However, recurring themes are beginning to emerge from our conversations.

1. Valuable community activity can be vulnerable
Some longstanding activities depend upon a handful of committed volunteers, often with limited succession arrangements. Their continued existence can mask underlying fragility, with the potential loss of both the activity and the relationships built around it.

2. Participation is not always straightforward
Groups report difficulties attracting new members, reaching people who might benefit or helping newcomers feel comfortable. The existence of an activity does not guarantee that residents know about it or feel able to attend.

3. Transport can determine whether people participate
Particularly in rural areas, transport remains a significant practical barrier. Communities may have suitable provision, but residents cannot always reach it. Understanding accessibility is therefore as important as identifying what activities are available.

4. Informal groups face different organisational challenges
Some small groups operate successfully without formal structures, while others face difficulties around banking, governance, safeguarding or volunteer arrangements. The appropriate response depends on the activity, its risks and the circumstances of the group.

5. Communities often already hold part of the solution
Conversations reveal existing venues, volunteers, businesses, skills, relationships

and activities that could be better connected or utilised. Sometimes the opportunity lies in strengthening what already exists rather than creating something new.

6. Financial need and organisational vulnerability are not the same
Some financially sustainable groups face challenges around leadership, participation or succession. Others need modest financial support to sustain valuable activity. Understanding the underlying circumstances is essential before deciding what support will be most useful.

7. Local circumstances shape both challenges and opportunities
The experiences of organisations differ across Dorset. Geography, transport, established relationships, local infrastructure and community identity all influence what support is needed and how people engage.

Turning local knowledge into practical value

Individually, these observations help us respond to particular organisations and communities. Collectively, they begin to reveal patterns that could inform wider decisions about our approach, support, investment and prevention.

For example, recurring concerns about volunteer succession may indicate a need for more targeted volunteer development. Reports of low participation despite existing provision may point towards problems with visibility, confidence, accessibility or referral pathways rather than a need to create additional services. Similarly, understanding the resources and relationships already present within a locality can help partners identify opportunities for collaboration before committing further investment.

The value of this intelligence is not simply in what we hear, but in what we can do with it. As Thriving Communities develops, there is an opportunity to capture these insights more consistently, identify emerging patterns across localities and share relevant intelligence with partners who can help address challenges or inform wider decisions.

Importantly, this must remain a two-way relationship. Communities should not simply be a source of information for wider systems. They should also benefit from improved access to knowledge, resources, opportunities and feedback about decisions that affect them. By connecting population-level evidence with the knowledge held by communities themselves, Thriving Communities can help create a more informed, responsive and locally grounded approach to prevention.

Try It. Do It. Grow It. – What grants look like in practice

The following examples illustrate how relatively small, targeted grants have the potential to make a meaningful difference to community organisations and the

people they support. They demonstrate the flexibility of the *Try It, Do It, Grow It* approach, from sustaining valued activities and improving accessibility and visibility, to testing new ideas and creating opportunities for social connection. Each grant responds to a specific local need, recognising that meaningful community impact does not always require significant financial investment. Importantly, these grants form part of a wider approach that combines funding with practical support, relationships and connections to help community activity thrive.

Grant Application 1: Community Café, Wool (Purbeck)
Grant requested: £250 | Purpose: External promotional signage

Established in response to local consultation highlighting loneliness and a lack of informal meeting spaces, the Community Café in Wool provides a welcoming place for residents to meet, socialise and build friendships.

Based at the D'Urberville Centre, the café brings together older residents, young families and others seeking social connection. Founded and run by two experienced community volunteers, the café was largely self-funded and now generates sufficient income from refreshments to cover its day-to-day running costs. Support from the Parish Council also helped refurbish the space.

As the café became established, its organisers identified a need to improve visibility and attract more residents. A £250 Thriving Communities grant funded an external swing sign, helping people discover the café and understand when it is open.

Early feedback suggests the sign is already improving awareness and attracting additional visitors.

What this investment could unlock: A small, targeted grant has strengthened the visibility and reach of an existing, financially-sustainable community initiative, helping more residents access opportunities for companionship and social connection.

Grant Application 2: Bishops Caundle Community Shop and Hub (North Dorset)
Grant requested: £1,200 | Purpose: Accessible technology and community engagement activities

Bishops Caundle Community Shop is developing its role beyond a village shop into a welcoming community hub, helping to reduce rural isolation, improve access to essential services and bring residents of different generations together.

The project aims to create a community café and social space, supported by volunteers, where residents can build friendships, share skills and participate in activities. VCD will also provide support with volunteer recruitment, development and

training, helping to strengthen the sustainability of the shop and its Post Office services. A £1,200 Thriving Communities grant will support two elements:

- **£750 – Accessible community laptop:** Touchscreen and voice-recognition technology to help residents, particularly older people and those with additional needs, access online services, complete forms and navigate digital health services.
- **£450 – Community engagement:** Six sessions over three months to bring residents and volunteers together, encourage intergenerational connections and support the development of an ongoing companionship group.

What this investment could unlock: Greater digital inclusion, stronger volunteer capacity and new opportunities for social connection, helping an established rural community asset develop its role in supporting local residents.

Grant Application 3: Love Dogs & the Environment West Dorset (Weymouth)
Grant requested: £1,200 | Purpose: Replacement gazebo and promotional materials

Love Dogs & the Environment West Dorset is a volunteer-led community group bringing people together through dog walking, outdoor activities and a shared interest in the environment. Operating across Weymouth and Dorchester, the group encourages physical activity, friendship and social connection, welcoming both dog owners and those who simply enjoy the company of dogs. Through regular 'Waggy Walks', seasonal beach walks and community events, Love Dogs has developed a supportive social network while promoting responsible dog ownership and care for local environments. Here is a link to a video VCD has produced that brings this group to life.

Following storm damage to its existing gazebo, the group applied for a £1,200 Thriving Communities grant to purchase a replacement heavy-duty gazebo, branded panels and a promotional feather flag. These promotional resources will enable the group to maintain its presence at community events, improve visibility and reach more potential participants.

What this investment could unlock: Greater community engagement and participation, helping an established volunteer-led group strengthen its reach and continue providing opportunities for friendship, outdoor activity and improved wellbeing.

Grant Application 4: Swanage Linking Lives
Grant requested: £450 | Purpose: Accessible transport & subsidised lunches for six social outings

Swanage Linking Lives is an established befriending organisation supporting people experiencing loneliness and social isolation, particularly older residents in Swanage and surrounding villages. Through trained volunteers, it provides regular companionship and support, with referrals from local health services and community organisations.

Building on its successful one-to-one befriending service, the organisation plans to pilot six social lunch outings over twelve months, enabling participants to develop wider friendships and enjoy shared experiences. Recognising that transport and cost can prevent older residents from participating, a £450 Thriving Communities grant, alongside an £80 contribution from the organisation's reserves, will help fund accessible minibus transport and subsidised lunches for up to eight participants per outing.

The pilot will allow Swanage Linking Lives to assess demand, gather feedback and explore whether group outings could become a sustainable addition to its existing service.

What this investment could unlock: New opportunities for friendship, confidence and social participation, while enabling an established organisation to test an approach that could strengthen its support for isolated older residents.

Grant Application 5: Vale Family Hub – Young at Heart Lunch Club
Grant requested: £3,000 | Purpose: One-year pilot of a community lunch club

Vale Family Hub, based in Sturminster Newton, is developing a new *Young at Heart Lunch Club* to address loneliness and social isolation, particularly among older residents with limited opportunities for social contact. Building on its established community services and existing kitchen facilities, the Hub plans to introduce a welcoming lunch club offering affordable, nutritious meals alongside opportunities for friendship, conversation and social activities.

A £3,000 Thriving Communities grant will support a one-year pilot, initially providing weekly sessions. Funding will contribute towards staffing (chef), volunteer expenses, coordination and activities. Modest participant contributions will help cover food costs and support longer-term sustainability.

Importantly, the pilot will remain flexible, with attendance and participant feedback informing whether weekly, fortnightly or monthly sessions offer the most effective and sustainable approach.

What this investment could unlock: A new opportunity for social connection and improved wellbeing, while enabling an established community organisation to test demand, refine its delivery model and build the foundations for a sustainable service.

PART THREE: WHERE WE GO NEXT

10. From Community Activity to Wider System Value

Building on the foundations of Year One

The first year of Thriving Communities has provided valuable evidence about how grassroots community activity can be better identified, supported and connected. The examples in Part Two demonstrate the practical difference that relationships, organisational support, community collaboration and modest financial investment can make.

The next challenge is to understand how these individual improvements can contribute to something wider: a more resilient community infrastructure that is better connected to Dorset's health and care system and better able to support residents before their needs escalate.

The opportunity is not simply to increase the amount of community activity, but to strengthen the connections between community capacity, residents and the wider services that support them.

Making better use of what already exists

Dorset has considerable community capacity, but its potential is not always fully recognised or utilised. Community organisations may be delivering valuable activities without being known to local health and care professionals. Professionals may be supporting people who could benefit from community provision but have limited awareness of what is available nearby. Groups facing similar challenges may be working independently, unaware of opportunities to share resources or collaborate. Thriving Communities can help bridge these gaps.

By strengthening relationships between community organisations and wider partners, the programme creates opportunities to make existing provision more visible, improve access and referrals, and connect organisations with the resources they need to remain sustainable.

This is particularly relevant to the development of neighbourhood health approaches, where understanding and connecting with the community assets available within a locality will be increasingly important.

Recognising the contribution to prevention

The contribution of grassroots community activity to prevention is often indirect and develops over time. A lunch club may provide regular social contact for someone who would otherwise spend much of their week alone. A volunteer-led activity may help an older resident maintain confidence and routine. A trusted relationship within a community group may create an opportunity to recognise when someone is not coping as they did and needs additional support.

These are important contributions, even where they cannot immediately be translated into measurable changes in demand for statutory services.

Thriving Communities does not claim that the Foundation Phase has demonstrated reductions in hospital admissions, GP appointments or care needs. Establishing that level of impact would require longer-term evidence and a more developed evaluation approach. What Year One has established is a practical model through which the community infrastructure supporting earlier intervention, participation and independence can be strengthened. The next phase must demonstrate not only what Thriving Communities delivers, but what changes because that infrastructure is stronger.

11. Community Intelligence: Connecting Local Experience with Wider Decisions

Understanding communities through relationships

One of the important opportunities emerging from Thriving Communities is the ability to develop a richer and more current understanding of community activity, capacity and challenges. Grassroots organisations and volunteers often hold knowledge that is difficult to capture through formal datasets. They understand who is attending activities, where participation is changing, which groups are struggling to recruit volunteers, what prevents people from getting involved and where local opportunities are emerging.

This intelligence is valuable because it provides context around the services and activities that exist within a community. It can also help identify vulnerabilities that may not otherwise be visible until an activity is at risk of closing or residents have lost access to support. Through Dorset Connect and direct engagement, Thriving Communities is beginning to create a mechanism for gathering and sharing this knowledge.

From listening to action

The value of community intelligence lies in what happens as a result. At a local level, it can inform practical responses: connecting organisations, addressing gaps in participation, identifying volunteer support needs or bringing partners together around a shared challenge. At a wider level, recurring themes across communities can help inform decisions about infrastructure support, investment, access to services and neighbourhood priorities.

The ambition is to develop a clear, two-way process:

Community experience → Local conversations and relationships → Shared intelligence → Partner decisions and action → Feedback to communities

This final step is particularly important. Community organisations need to see that the knowledge and experiences they share are valued and, where appropriate, have informed decisions or practical action.

Developing a more systematic approach

During the next phase, we intend to strengthen how community intelligence is captured, reviewed and shared. This will include identifying recurring themes across

Dorset Connect localities, recording emerging challenges and opportunities, and developing appropriate ways to share relevant insight with health, local authority and other partners.

We will also seek to distinguish between individual experiences, recurring observations and wider evidence, ensuring that local intelligence informs decision-making without being presented as a comprehensive assessment of community need.

Over time, this could provide Dorset with a valuable additional source of insight into the strengths, vulnerabilities and opportunities within its communities. Thriving Communities can help ensure that community knowledge does not remain within individual conversations, but contributes to better-informed local action and wider planning.

12. The Next Phase: Embedding and Strengthening the Model

From establishing the approach to demonstrating its value

The Foundation Phase has enabled us to test assumptions, develop relationships and establish a more connected model of community support. The next phase should focus on embedding that approach, addressing the gaps identified through Year One and developing stronger evidence of its contribution.

This is not simply a question of increasing the number of networks, organisations or grants. The learning has demonstrated that meaningful engagement takes time, different communities require different approaches and the support needed by grassroots organisations is often practical rather than financial. Our priorities for the next phase are therefore focused on strengthening the quality, reach and effectiveness of the model.

Our priorities

1. Reach further into grassroots communities
Develop a more proactive approach to identifying and engaging smaller, informal and volunteer-led groups, particularly those not currently connected to established networks or infrastructure support. This will require more time spent within communities, building trusted relationships and understanding what is already happening locally.

2. Embed Dorset Connect as a practical neighbourhood resource
Continue developing Dorset Connect around the needs and opportunities of

individual localities, with a clear emphasis on collaboration, shared resources and practical action. Strengthen communication and follow-up between meetings, and work alongside existing networks rather than creating unnecessary duplication.

3. Strengthen the sustainability of existing community provision
Provide proportionate support that responds to the circumstances of each organisation, including volunteering, succession planning, governance, safeguarding, visibility, participation and organisational development. Recognise that helping an existing activity continue successfully can be just as valuable as supporting a new initiative.

4. Improve connections with neighbourhood health and care
Develop stronger relationships between community organisations and the professionals supporting residents, including social prescribing, community health and other neighbourhood services. Increase our presence within the INT and Neighbourhood Health programmes. The aim is to improve mutual awareness, appropriate signposting and referral opportunities, while ensuring community organisations are not expected to take on responsibilities beyond their capacity or purpose.

5. Make better use of community assets and targeted investment
Continue developing the Try It, Do It, Grow It approach, using conversations and local knowledge to identify where funding can add value. Ensure that investment decisions reflect community need, knowledge and feedback. Alongside grants, place greater emphasis on mobilising existing resources, including volunteers, venues, equipment, expertise, business support and partnerships.

6. Develop stronger community intelligence and evidence
Introduce more consistent ways of recording connections, support provided, challenges identified, actions taken and outcomes achieved. Use selected longer-term case studies to understand how organisations and activities develop over time, and what contribution Thriving Communities has made.

Investing in the capacity to make the model work

One of the clearest implications of Year One, is that the effectiveness of Thriving Communities depends upon having sufficient capacity to work directly with communities.

Developing Thriving Communities during Phase One, has required considerable additional resources from VCD, well beyond the funding provided for this programme. The infrastructure to roll-out a programme of this scale and impact has required the resources of around eight members of the wider team at varying scale and stages. They have supported with skills, experience, resources and time around

co-ordination, administration, training, marketing, communications, engagement, management, oversight, and reporting, that has enabled significant progress.

The current funding envelope for the programme provides approximately 0.5 full-time equivalent staffing capacity, plus on-costs, some management, and overheads. While this has enabled important foundations to be established, the learning suggests that more dedicated community engagement and development capacity will be needed to reach organisations that remain outside established networks. This work takes time, and presence in communities – and it requires more manpower.

Identifying these groups, building trust, understanding their circumstances and providing appropriate support cannot be achieved through communications, meetings or grant administration alone.

This has implications for the balance of future investment. The next phase may deliver greater value by increasing the capacity for direct community engagement, organisational support and relationship-building, rather than increasing the amount available for grants.

Grant funding should remain available where it can unlock or sustain valuable activity. However, the Foundation Phase has demonstrated that funding is most effective when supported by the relationships, local knowledge and organisational capacity needed to make good use of it.

Any future investment model should therefore reflect the full cost of delivering Thriving Communities, including community development, coordination, infrastructure support, partnership working, intelligence gathering, management and evaluation.

Building towards longer-term sustainability

The remaining Foundation Phase provides an opportunity to establish a stronger evidence base and explore how the model could be sustained beyond the current funding period.

This should include considering how Thriving Communities can align with wider neighbourhood health and prevention priorities, where responsibilities and resources could be shared with partners, and how longer-term investment might support the infrastructure that enables community activity to thrive.

The intention is not to create a permanent dependency on programme funding for individual groups. It is to establish a sustainable approach through which communities can continue to access connections, support and appropriate investment as their needs evolve.

13. Demonstrating Impact: What We Will Measure Next

Moving beyond activity measures

Year One has provided useful information about engagement, participation, relationships and investment. These measures demonstrate programme activity and reach, but do not, on their own, tell us whether community organisations are becoming stronger or whether residents are experiencing meaningful benefits.

The next phase will therefore place greater emphasis on what is needed to understand what is changing over time. Our central evaluation question will be: **What changed, for whom, and what contribution did Thriving Communities make?**

To understand the longer-term value of Thriving Communities, we will evaluate more than the number of organisations engaged, meetings held or grants awarded. Our focus will increasingly be on what changes as a result of the relationships, support and investment provided.

The following framework identifies six connected areas through which we will assess progress, from reaching grassroots organisations and strengthening community capacity to understanding the experiences of residents and the programme's wider contribution to prevention.


REACH
Who are we connecting with?
Engaging with a diverse range of community organisations and activity across Dorset, including grassroots groups and those outside established networks.
CONNECTION
What happens because people are connected?
Building new relationships, collaboration, referrals and shared resources between community organisations and with wider partners.
CAPACITY
Is community infrastructure becoming stronger?
Supporting organisations to develop their people, governance, volunteering, visibility, partnership working and long-term resilience.
COMMUNITY ACTIVITY
What is being tested, sustained or developed?
Enabling new activities, sustaining valuable provision and developing existing activity through investment, collaboration and wider community assets.
PEOPLE
What difference is being experienced?
Supporting greater connection, participation, belonging, confidence, activity, access to support and independence for residents.
SYSTEM CONTRIBUTION
How is this contributing to prevention?
Strengthening pathways between community provision and health and care, informing action through community intelligence and contributing to a stronger, healthier and more resilient Dorset.

We propose to assess progress across six connected areas.

Area	What we want to understand
Reach	Are we identifying and engaging grassroots organisations that were previously outside established networks?
Connection	Are relationships leading to useful introductions, referrals, shared resources and collaborative action?
Capacity	Are organisations better equipped to sustain their activities, manage challenges and support volunteers?
Community activity	Has valued provision been sustained, improved, made more accessible or developed in response to local needs?
People	What evidence is emerging of increased participation, social connection, confidence and wellbeing among residents?
System contribution	Is community intelligence informing decisions, and are stronger links developing between community provision and wider services?

Combining data with lived experience

A meaningful evaluation will require both quantitative information and qualitative evidence. We will continue recording engagement, support provided, grants awarded and activity enabled, but will increasingly capture what happens afterwards. This could include whether an organisation recruited volunteers, addressed a sustainability challenge, developed a new partnership, increased participation or improved its connections with local services.

We also intend to develop a small number of longitudinal case studies, following organisations and activities over time to understand what changes, what contributes to those changes and what challenges remain. This is particularly important because the benefits of community development may emerge gradually and are not always attributable to a single intervention.

Being realistic about impact

We recognise that stronger community infrastructure is one contribution to prevention, rather than a direct or isolated solution to pressures within health and care.

The evaluation will therefore distinguish between:

- **Activity and outputs:** What the programme delivered.
- **Early outcomes:** What changed for organisations, relationships and community activities.
- **Longer-term outcomes:** What difference those changes may make to residents' participation, wellbeing, independence and access to support.

We will seek to understand the programme's contribution without attributing wider health outcomes to Thriving Communities where the evidence does not support that conclusion. This approach will enable us to build a more credible case for future investment, grounded in practical evidence of what works, for whom and in which circumstances.

14. Conclusions and Recommendations

A stronger foundation for community-led prevention

Thriving Communities began with a hypothesis: that stronger local networks and targeted funding could help identify and support grassroots activity contributing to older people's health, wellbeing and independence.

The Foundation Phase has shown that the opportunity is both greater and more complex than originally anticipated. Dorset already has a wealth of valuable community activity, but much of it operates with limited visibility, support or connection to wider services. Strengthening that capacity requires more than individual grants or opportunities to network. It requires the time, relationships, knowledge and practical infrastructure needed to help community organisations sustain what they do well and connect with the wider resources available to them.

Year One has enabled us to adapt the original approach and establish a model that responds more closely to those realities. The next phase is an opportunity to consolidate that progress, deepen engagement with grassroots organisations and demonstrate the value of a more connected approach to community development.

Recommendations to Dorset Council and the Dorset Health and Wellbeing Board

We invite you to:

1. Recognise the importance of grassroots community infrastructure as part of Dorset's wider approach to prevention, wellbeing and neighbourhood health,

including the value of small, informal and volunteer-led activities that may sit outside established systems.

2. Support the continued development of the Thriving Communities model through the remaining Foundation Phase, with an emphasis on embedding Dorset Connect, strengthening grassroots organisations and improving connections between community provision and health & care partners.

3. Endorse a stronger role for community intelligence in informing neighbourhood priorities, recognising the value of local knowledge alongside formal data and supporting opportunities for relevant insight to reach partners and decision-makers.

4. Support the development of a longer-term investment proposition that reflects the learning from Year One, including the importance of dedicated community engagement and development capacity alongside proportionate grant funding.

5. Support a clear approach to evaluating outcomes, enabling the programme to demonstrate changes in community capacity, connections, participation and sustainability, and to build a stronger evidence base for its contribution to prevention.

Specific Programme Development Actions Recommended

To progress Thriving Communities significantly in this phase, we are requesting these three specific developments:

1. To roll out the programme in a more targeted and significant way, we need more human resources working on the ground in communities. Currently, we have a 0.5 FTE dedicated to this work. Ideally, we would need 3.0 FTE to really make an impact across Dorset.
2. We are ready to roll out the programme across Dorset. As part of our wider work, we have been laying foundations for Thriving Communities in all localities. This includes creating Dorset Connect networks, connecting with health, town & parish councils, local VCS and other stakeholders.
3. Consider broadening the scope of grants to include sole traders who are not formally within the VCS, mirror some VCS provision. They are often confused as VCS because they are delivering low cost services, support or activities that bring community value, and improve the health and wellbeing of older people. This would increase the ability to be able to encourage wider provision, particularly in more remote areas, that is no/low risk for the provider.

This additional capacity presents these opportunities

Subject to further investment or additional resources, the programme could:

- Undertake more extensive grassroots identification and outreach.
- Provide more intensive support to vulnerable community organisations.
- Increase dedicated locality-based community development capacity.
- Develop more systematic community asset mapping and intelligence gathering.
- Strengthen formal links with neighbourhood health teams.
- Expand outcome monitoring and longer-term evaluation.

The Foundation Phase is intended to establish a model that can inform a more sustainable approach to community-led prevention. Year Two will therefore consider not only how the programme performs, but what would be required to maintain and develop the approach beyond the initial funding period.

This work will include:

- Identifying the elements of Thriving Communities that provide the greatest value.
- Understanding the level of community development and infrastructure capacity required.
- Considering how the model can align with Dorset's neighbourhood health and prevention priorities.
- Exploring opportunities for collaboration, shared delivery and potential future investment.
- Assessing the balance between direct community development, organisational support, grants and evaluation.
- Developing a longer-term proposition supported by Year One and Year Two evidence.

The intention is not to create ongoing grant dependency for individual groups, but to establish a sustainable infrastructure through which community organisations can access relationships, practical support and appropriate investment as needs change.

Looking ahead

The first year has demonstrated that meaningful community development is not simply about introducing new activities or distributing funding. It is about recognising the value of what communities already do, understanding what enables that activity to continue and creating the conditions for people and organisations to work more effectively together.

The foundations are now in place to develop this approach further.

Our ambition is for Dorset's community infrastructure to become better connected, more visible and more resilient – so that valuable local activity can continue to support people to live well, remain independent and feel part of their communities.

The next phase will be an important opportunity to turn the learning of Year One into stronger evidence, more sustainable community capacity and a clearer long-term contribution to Dorset's prevention ambitions.

15. Year Two Plan

Purpose of the Year Two Plan

In response to the development and learning in Year One, VCD has developed an inter-connected Thriving Communities model built around six elements:

CONNECT • UNDERSTAND • STRENGTHEN • REACH • COLLABORATE • INVEST

Dorset Connect networks provide the neighbourhood infrastructure through which these elements can be brought together, alongside the flexible Try It, Do It, Grow It community investment grants.

The purpose of Year Two is to move from establishing and testing this approach to embedding it in practice, strengthening delivery, demonstrating outcomes and developing a sustainable proposition for the future.

For the purposed of this plan, no presumption has been made about the adoption and implementation of the suggested programme developments.

This programme plan will therefore retain its focus on grassroots community activity contributing to the health, wellbeing, social connection and independence of older residents, within the three original Foundation Phase areas, within current funded resources.

Year Two Objectives

Year Two will focus on six interconnected objectives.

1. **Increase engagement with grassroots organisations**, particularly small, informal and volunteer-led groups that remain outside established networks and support structures.
2. **Embed Dorset Connect as an effective neighbourhood resource**, enabling practical collaboration, shared resources, local problem-solving and stronger relationships between communities and wider partners.

3. **Mobilise community assets and deliver targeted investment**, using the Try It, Do It, Grow It framework to support locally identified needs and opportunities.
4. **Strengthen the capacity and resilience of community organisations**, providing proportionate support that enables valuable existing activity to continue and develop where appropriate.
5. **Improve access and connections between community provision and health and care**, increasing awareness, signposting and appropriate referral opportunities.
6. **Develop community intelligence and gathering insights** resulting from the programme and informing a longer-term approach to community-led prevention.

Delivery Priorities and Activities

Priority 1: Increase engagement with Grassroots VCS

Objective: Continue to identify and engage smaller, informal and volunteer-led organisations that may not currently be visible through established VCS networks or directories.

Year Two activities

- Develop a resource-friendly and proactive approach to identifying grassroots activity within the three Foundation Phase areas.
- Build on local relationships with parish and town councils, village halls, community venues, libraries, faith organisations, health professionals and existing community groups.
- Undertake further targeted outreach and visits to organisations that may be unlikely to attend formal network meetings.
- Continue one-to-one conversations to understand organisational circumstances, challenges, strengths and aspirations.
- Identify and support organisations at risk of losing valuable activity through volunteer shortages, succession issues, declining participation or other pressures.
- Record emerging support needs and opportunities for further engagement.
- Continue raising awareness of Thriving Communities grant fund

Expected outcomes

- Growing awareness of previously unidentified grassroots community activity.
- Increased engagement with organisations outside established networks.
- Greater understanding of the strengths, vulnerabilities and opportunities within local community infrastructure.
- More organisations accessing appropriate support, connections or investment.

Priority 2: Embed Dorset Connect as a Practical Neighbourhood Resource

Objective: Strengthen Dorset Connect as a mechanism for collaboration, community intelligence, practical support and local action.

Year Two activities

- Continue developing Dorset Connect locality networks, with a focus on the original Foundation Phase areas.
- Maintain regular opportunities for both in-person and online engagement, reflecting local circumstances and participant preferences.
- Continue developing the Ask One / Give One approach to identify resources, challenges and opportunities.
- Provide opportunities for organisations to 'Bring a Challenge', including proposals seeking support through Thriving Communities grant funding.
- Maintain consistent recording and follow-up of actions, connections and collaborations generated through meetings.
- Continue to develop communication between meetings through introductions, updates and appropriate digital channels.
- Complement existing local networks and partnerships.
- Encourage participation from health, care, town and parish councils, businesses and other organisations able to contribute local knowledge or resources.

Expected outcomes

- Dorset Connect becomes increasingly recognised as a useful neighbourhood resource.
- More connections result in practical actions, partnerships and shared resources.
- Grassroots organisations have improved access to information, expertise and wider support.
- Local partners develop a better understanding of community provision and opportunities.

Success will be measured not simply by attendance, but by what happens because people are connected.

Priority 3: Mobilise and Invest in Community Assets and Priorities

Objective: Ensure that financial investment is informed by local knowledge and lived experience, complemented by the wider assets and resources available within communities.

Year Two activities

- Continue delivering the Try It, Do It, Grow It grant model.
- Maintain a conversation-led approach to understanding grant enquiries and organisational needs.
- Encourage applicants, where appropriate, to present ideas or challenges through Dorset Connect before grant decisions.
- Explore opportunities to mobilise volunteers, venues, equipment, expertise, business support, communications and partnerships alongside financial investment.
- Support organisations to develop proportionate and sustainable proposals.
- Maintain transparent grant assessment and decision-making through the central Thriving Communities Grant Panel.
- Follow up with grant recipients to understand progress, challenges and early outcomes.
- Capture examples where collaboration or in-kind support has strengthened an activity or reduced the need for financial investment.

Expected outcomes

- Targeted investment supports activities that respond to identified community needs and opportunities.
- Grant recipients benefit from wider connections and practical support.
- Community resources are better utilised.
- Funded activities have stronger foundations for sustainability.

The emphasis will remain on the value and sustainability of community activity, rather than maximising the number of grants awarded.

Priority 4: Strengthen the Sustainability of Existing Community Provision

Objective: Help grassroots organisations remain safe, resilient, accessible and sustainable, without imposing unnecessary formalisation or expectations of growth.

Year Two activities

- Provide proportionate infrastructure support according to each organisation's circumstances.
- Support groups with volunteer recruitment, retention and succession planning.
- Offer guidance on governance, safeguarding, organisational structures and financial arrangements where appropriate.
- Support communications, marketing and visibility to help organisations reach residents who could benefit from their activities.
- Help organisations explore sustainable approaches to participation, leadership, income and volunteer involvement.
- Identify where introductions, specialist advice, training or collaboration may resolve challenges without grant funding.
- Encourage organisations to consider their longer-term resilience while respecting their purpose and preferred scale.

Expected outcomes

- Community organisations are better equipped to address identified challenges.
- Valuable existing activities are supported to continue.
- Groups have stronger volunteer, governance or organisational arrangements where needed.
- Organisations gain greater confidence in accessing support and responding to changing circumstances.

Priority 5: Strengthen Connections with Neighbourhood Health and Care

Objective: Improve relationships between community provision and the professionals supporting older residents, helping existing activities become more visible and accessible.

Year Two activities

- Increase engagement with Integrated Neighbourhood Teams, Primary Care Networks, social prescribing teams and other relevant health and care partners.
- Invite more health and care partners to participate in their local Dorset Connect network.

- Improve mutual awareness of local community activities and wider health and care services.
- Support grassroots organisations to communicate what they offer, who they support and how people can access their activities.
- Explore practical ways to improve signposting and appropriate referrals into existing community provision.
- Identify barriers affecting access, including transport, accessibility, confidence and awareness.
- Share examples of effective community and health partnerships to encourage wider learning.

Expected outcomes

- Stronger relationships between community organisations and health and care professionals.
- Improved awareness of available community support.
- More opportunities for appropriate signposting and referral.
- Better understanding of the practical barriers affecting residents' access to community activity.

The programme will not assume that grassroots organisations can take on additional responsibilities or capacity. Connections must reflect the capacity, safeguarding arrangements and purpose of individual organisations.

Priority 6: Develop Community Intelligence and Demonstrate Outcomes

Objective: Establish more consistent approaches to capturing community intelligence, recording outcomes and demonstrating the programme's contribution to prevention.

Year Two activities

- Develop a proportionate system for recording engagement, organisational support, connections, referrals, collaborations and outcomes.
- Identify recurring themes emerging through Dorset Connect and direct community engagement.
- Distinguish between individual experiences, recurring observations and wider evidence.
- Produce periodic summaries of community intelligence, including emerging challenges, gaps, vulnerabilities, assets and opportunities.
- Explore appropriate ways to share relevant intelligence with commissioners, health and care partners and other decision-makers.
- Develop a two-way feedback approach so communities can understand how their insights have informed action.
- Select a small number of organisations or activities for longer-term case studies.
- Gather qualitative feedback from organisations, partners and, where practical, residents participating in supported activities.
- Develop a Year Two evaluation report assessing changes in community capacity, connection, activity and access to support.

Expected outcomes

- Improved evidence of the programme's contribution beyond activity and attendance figures.

- Better understanding of changes experienced by supported organisations.
- Stronger insight into the relationship between community infrastructure and residents' opportunities for participation and wellbeing.

Community intelligence becomes more useful in informing programme delivery and wider partnership discussions.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting

Year One established useful measures of activity and engagement. Year Two will place greater emphasis on understanding what changes because of the support, relationships and investment provided. The central evaluation question will be: **What changed, for whom, and what contribution did Thriving Communities make?**

What Success Will Look Like at the End of Year Two

By the end of the Foundation Phase, we aim to demonstrate that:

1. **More grassroots organisations are visible and connected**, including groups previously outside established networks.
2. **Dorset Connect is producing practical value**, with examples of collaboration, shared resources, problem-solving and improved connections.
3. **Community organisations are becoming stronger**, with evidence of improvements in capacity, sustainability, participation or access to support.
4. **Existing community provision is being better utilised**, with stronger relationships between local groups and the professionals supporting residents.
5. **Targeted investment is being used effectively**, supported by local knowledge, collaboration and proportionate organisational development.
6. **Community intelligence is contributing to local action**, with a clearer mechanism for sharing insight and feeding information back to communities.
7. **A stronger evidence base is available**, demonstrating early outcomes for organisations, activities and residents, alongside the programme's contribution to prevention.
8. **A credible longer-term investment proposition has been developed**, identifying the resources, partnerships and delivery arrangements required to sustain and build upon the model.

APPENDIX

Funding Model – Try It. Do It. Grow It.

TRY IT - Testing ideas and responding to local need

Try It supports communities to test new ideas without requiring them to have everything fully developed before they begin, or risk their own funds. A conversation through Dorset Connect or with VCD might identify a gap, challenge or opportunity within a community. Rather than immediately developing a large programme or service, a small investment can enable local people to test an idea, learn from experience and understand whether there is demand.

This could support a new activity, a short pilot, consultation with residents, the purchase of equipment or resources, or the development of a new partnership.

The principle is: Start small. Learn quickly. Build from what works. This creates space for community-led innovation while reducing the risk of investing significant resources before an idea has been tested.

DO IT - Sustaining what communities already value

One of the strongest lessons from the Foundation Phase is that innovation does not always mean creating something new. Across Dorset, there are community groups and activities that have quietly supported residents for many years. Friendship groups, lunch clubs, social activities, community cafés and other volunteer-led provision can provide important opportunities for connection, participation, friendship, purpose and mutual support.

Do It recognises the value of what already works. Investment can help an established activity continue where relatively modest support could make a meaningful difference – for example through venue costs, equipment, transport, volunteer expenses, communications or other delivery costs.

This is particularly important where an activity is valued by its community but operates with very limited resources. Sometimes the most valuable investment is not creating something new – it is protecting something good that a community would miss if it disappeared.

GROW IT - Developing proven community activity

Grow It supports activity that is already working but where there is evidence of an opportunity to develop further. Growth does not have to mean becoming a larger organisation. It might mean reaching a neighbouring community, increasing the number of sessions available, recruiting additional volunteers, improving accessibility, strengthening organisational capacity or responding to increased demand.

For some organisations, it may also involve developing governance, leadership, partnerships or income generation so that successful activity becomes more sustainable. The important distinction is that growth should be purposeful rather than assumed.

The Foundation Phase demonstrated that not every grassroots organisation wants or needs to grow. Some groups are successful precisely because they are small and deeply rooted in a particular community. Therefore, Grow It is an opportunity, not an expectation.

THRIVING COMMUNITIES GRANTS
WHO CAN APPLY?

VCS Identity	Annual income	Maximum grant	What is grant for?	Governance
Unincorporated VCS group	Up to £2,000	£1,000	· New initiative · Existing activity · Building capacity	· Restricted for agreed project · Safeguarding policy & training · Nominated fund holder, eg Parish Council · Participate in Dorset Connect · End of term report · Case-by-case guidance on best practice (eg insurance, food handling)
Small incorporated VCS Group (eg charity, CIC, CIO)	Up to £10,000	£2,000	· New initiative · Existing activity · Building capacity	· Project or core costs · Safeguarding policy & training · Named bank account · Participate in Dorset Connect · End of term report · Case-by-case guidance on best practice (eg insurance, food handling)
Medium incorporated VCS Group (eg charity, CIC, CIO)	Up to £100,000	£4,000	· New initiative · Existing activity · Building capacity	· Restricted for agreed project · Safeguarding policy & training · Named bank account · Participate in Dorset Connect · End of term report · Case-by-case guidance on best practice (eg insurance, food handling)
Larger incorporated VCS Group (eg charity, CIC, CIO)	Over £100,000	£2,500	· Seeding new activity	· Restricted for agreed project · Safeguarding policy & training · Named bank account · Participate in Dorset Connect · End of term report · Case-by-case guidance on best practice (eg insurance, food handling)

Ask One / Give One

This is a new feature of Dorset Connect allowing all participants to give and receive. There is no limit to what can be written on the post-it notes and placed on the wall, so there are some brilliantly different contributions.

This list is distributed to everyone who attended, to become an ongoing resource and opportunity. VCD treats each contribution as a possible lead, and during a team debrief, team members are allocated work to follow up, connect, or help.

Dorset Connect: Ask One

Organisation	Ask One
Read Easy South Dorset	Publicity volunteer needed (and other roles available). Ideas for publicity for non-readers to access.
The Friendly Food Club	Groups with people with young children 0-5 to sign post early years sessions around weaning & fussy eating.
The Lantern Trust	Ideas to signpost older isolated people in Weymouth & Portland Area.
Weymouth Community Workshop	We are looking for space with ventilation to expand Weymouth Community Workshop
St Nicholas Church	Funding for an accessible toilet please!
Future Portland Community Benefit Society	Would like to have a more diverse membership, how?
The Parish of Wyke Regis	Volunteers to help with fellowship project by welcoming and serving teas & coffees.
Age UK North, South and West Dorset	Reasonably priced large rooms to hire in Weymouth with good access, parking and near bus stops if possible too.
Ridgewater	How can we reach residents facing fuel poverty in Weymouth & Portland who would benefit from our services?
Weymouth Area Development Trust CIC	Needs – Board Members (pro bono), Account/Treasurers and a Charity Lawyer
Elevate Employment Services	Local partners able to offer referrals, volunteering, site visits, employer talks, mock interviews, short taster, work experience, apprenticeships, entry level jobs – particularly opportunities accessible to young people with little or no work history.
Weymouth Town Council	Tell me about what you need, what you do, & challenges faced – let's see how we can work together.

Organisation	Ask One
Westham Methodist Church	We always need new volunteers for a range of activities.
Age UK North, South and West Dorset	Volunteers, Visitor needed in Weymouth & Dorchester and fundraising/admin support
Dorchester Community Plays Association	Help / advice with GDPR regulations Social media help, Fundraising opportunities Rehearsal/workshop space
Dorchester Bike Park Community Project	Advice on legal structures & fundraising.
LiveWell Dorset	Appreciate connections to communities & leads for better access to our services.
Dorchester Library and Learning Centre	Build new partnerships with different organisations.
Help Dorset	Community creative social group –awareness and support for residents with disabilities
Money Ready	Space to run courses/drop-ins on financial education for People aged 7 – 40 Ideas of what people could do with financial education on, or support with.
South West Dorset Multicultural Network	Space to hold events in the future Advice & guidance around fraud, crime and anti-social behaviour/hate crimes.
Dorset Youth Association	All organisations to do more with young people.
Home-Start Wessex	Volunteers, Charity shop items, Paper & card (coloured) for craft. Opportunity for corporate fundraising and events to join in.
Dorchester Chaplains	More town Chaplains – need to be sponsored by their church.
Mid Dorset Primary Care Network	Mid-Dorset Primary Care Network (PCN) are organising a Diabetes information event at the Dorford Centre on Friday 20th November from 9am-12pm. They would love about 6 volunteers to

Organisation	Ask One
	help on the day for things such as welcoming guests, helping with refreshments and floating support. For more information and to offer support please contact Sharon

Dorset Connect: Give One

Organisation	Give One
Weymouth & Portland PCN	More than happy to chat / support and showcase services at Health & Wellbeing Fairs throughout the year.
Weymouth Area Development Trust CIC	Shared space. Connections with businesses. Project support.
Dorset Council – Community Transport	Information on community transport schemes in Dorset – Type community transport directory on the Dorset Council website to bring up the interactive map. Community Transport Grants – Available on the DC website – applications close 20/10/26 – 3 groups to apply: - Up to 5K capital grant - Up to 2.5K revenue grant - Up to 20K longer revenue grant
The Friendly Food Club	Intro demo session – opportunity to learn about running cooking sessions for your group/ community.
The Lantern Trust	Support older people with benefits checks (Attendance Allowance etc.) and over 55's.
Elevate Employment Services	Supported progression route for 16–18-year-olds, English & Maths, employability, CV/applications, interview support, confidence, work experience, named contact for referrals. Can also bring employers/partners in for talks, mock interviews or site visits.
The Parish of Wyke Regis	Hire space, volunteering opportunities and fellowship activities.
St Nicholas Church	Happy to help and organize fundraising events and to hold them at St Nicholas Church, Broadwey.

Organisation	Give One
Age UK North, South and West Dorset	Did you know that Age UK NSWD runs a volunteer led 'Good Neighbour' scheme in Weymouth area doing 'one-off' tasks for older people in their homes (e.g. change a lightbulb).
Ridgewater	Share your projects & opportunities in our Newsletter & Social media.
Dorset Council – Public Health & Protection	Public Health – data on population health if you need it. Information on public health services locally (smoking cessation, alcohol reduction, physical activity, weight management).
Home-start Wessex	Family support and fund-raising ideas.
Weymouth Town Council	Support local organisations, linking up with each other. Information on Weymouth Town Council Grants. Linking up with Primary Care Network. Promoting what you do.
Weymouth Vehicle Preservation Society	Expertise and resources
Westham Methodist Church	We have Space for use
Age UK North, South and West Dorset	Talks on our services, welfare benefits, fraud & scams. Potential space for groups to meet.
Dorchester Community Plays Association	Workshops/talks & activities Collaboration & opportunities for everyone Social events
Dorchester Bike Park Community Project	New community space for all ages to be active
LiveWell Dorset	Resources & Health MOT's (blood pressure, BMI checks) & NHS checks, all free. Health & wellbeing training for professionals who support other people - free
Dorchester Library and Learning Centre	Library space for use by groups.

Organisation	Give One
Money Ready	I can offer free financial education support to people in Dorset (Focus aged 4-40)
South West Dorset Multicultural Network	Collaboration within wider Dorchester / Dorset community. Advice for individuals and groups, as well as other organisaitons.
Dorset Youth Association	Hall for use at Dorset Youth Advertise – Social media filming for young people projects/organisations. Dorset Youth Website full of activities & groups to join. Newsletter – Young people related. Core memories funding - £140.000 for youth organisations – APPLY! DBS / Safeguarding
Home-Start Wessex	Fundraising advice.
Volunteer Center Dorset	Connection in community, health, councils Support with engagement - market services Lots of in-person & online training on a range of subjects.

Photos from Dorset Connect

Below on the following pages are a sample of photos from Dorset Connect networks in different localities.





