



**Your Essex
Community**

Supporting the Voluntary
and Community Sector



Your Essex Community

PLACE-BASED SUPPORT

July 2026

Year 1 Report, completed
by Active Essex



Year 1 of the Your Essex Community Place-Based Support Offer has completed its first full year of insight-led infrastructure development for the voluntary and community sector (VCS).

The infrastructure support delivered in place, responded to key local priorities which were identified as part of our original insight work and supported the production of local insight plans. These plans highlighting the strengths already in place as well as support needs and the ambitions of the local VCS. The insight phase was delivered via an online survey, which engaged 138 organisations as well as 38 face to face listening events, forums and drop in sessions across Essex, ensuring we had a wide range of voices contributing.

[View the place plans here.](#)

Following the development of the place plans we held an open application process for VCS and system partners to apply to become delivery partners and together we were able to develop bespoke locality support offer in each district as well as an Essex wide offer, that responded directly to local VCS infrastructure needs.

Delivery across all 12 districts was undertaken by a mixture of community organisations, and infrastructure partners working alongside Active Essex Relationship Teams.

Key priorities for the VCS across Essex, and therefore the support offer, included sustainable income, affordable training, partnership development, and volunteer capacity, alongside local district-level needs. The support offer launched in September 2025 and, in just 6 months, engaged and supported 1,221 people through 118 activities, which were a mixture of face to face training workshops, networking and share and learn forums and an Online Learning Series.

Activities aligned with the Theory of Change, focusing on relationships, learning, and local infrastructure strengthening.

Overall, provider feedback indicates that the Your Essex Community Place Based Support Programme was positively received and delivered meaningful benefit to those who attended. While recruitment and attendance varied across activities, the quality of delivery, relevance of content and opportunities for connection were consistently highlighted as key strengths. Of those attending, we received 530 feedback responses with 95% stating that they were very satisfied or satisfied with the support on offer.

Across the programme, participants valued high-quality facilitation, knowledgeable trainers and practical content that could be immediately applied within their organisations. Many sessions created safe and informal spaces for open discussion, peer learning and honest reflection, particularly around volunteering, governance, equality, digital skills, funding and organisational development. Networking was repeatedly highlighted as a key benefit, with several events enabling organisations to meet others they were previously unaware of, identify complementary services, and initiate follow-up conversations or collaborative working.

A recurring strength of the programme was its responsiveness to local need. Listening events and discussion based sessions generated rich insight into the challenges facing organisations, including volunteer recruitment and retention, funding pressures, capacity constraints, digital confidence, communication and navigating complex issues such as EDI, safeguarding and volunteering law. This intelligence has directly informed the design of ongoing and future support, ensuring the programme remains grounded in lived experience and local priorities.

The programme also demonstrated clear added value through partnership working. Events delivered in collaboration with place-based infrastructure partners, local authorities, funders, employers, health partners and specialist organisations were particularly well received. Joint planning and delivery enabled partners to play to their strengths, enhanced credibility with the sector, and created more engaging, professionally delivered events. Several sessions resulted in tangible outcomes, including follow up one-to-one support requests, brokerage with funders, commitments to repeat or extend training, and new relationships between organisations and stakeholders.

However, attendance and recruitment was a consistent challenge across parts of the programme. While some courses were fully booked or well attended, many sessions experienced lower turnout than anticipated, with non attendance from some registered participants. Providers noted a range of contributing factors, including the difficulty of engaging organisations around certain subject areas, capacity pressures within the sector, weather, timing, venue issues and last minute cancellations. Importantly, feedback indicates that smaller group sizes often enhanced the quality of discussion, enabling deeper exploration of issues, greater peer support and more tailored facilitation.

Practical learning was a strong feature throughout the programme. Participants reported increased confidence across a broad range of areas, including volunteer management, mental health awareness, digital tools, campaigning, social media, governance, first aid, conflict management, fundraising and impact measurement. In several cases, participants identified clear next steps for their organisations, such as changing approaches to community engagement, improving internal practice, adopting new tools, or seeking further training and support.

Overall, provider feedback shows that the Your Essex Community programme has been effective in strengthening capability, confidence and connection within the VCFSE sector. While recruitment challenges highlight the need for continued learning around promotion, timing and format, the quality of delivery, depth of engagement and tangible outcomes for those who attended demonstrate strong value for money and a solid foundation for future activity. The programme has reinforced the importance of accessible, locally delivered support that combines skills development with relationship-building, and it has created momentum for continued collaboration, learning and sector development across Essex.

Key Successes

1. Networking as the strongest delivery mechanism

Networking consistently delivered the highest value and more networking opportunities was the most requested further support ask.

2. Strong pockets of high quality delivery

Although across Essex there was mixed feedback about the quality of face to face delivery, there was some excellent and highly effective place based infrastructure work delivered.

Across the board, feedback showed:

- 95% satisfaction (502/530).
- Strong ratings for content, speakers, and facilitation.
- Net Promoter Score +78 (379 promoters, 11 detractors).

- 416 “definitely” and 92 “to some extent” intend to apply learning.

3. Centralised, online training

As part of the Essex wide offer we developed a centralised Online Learning Series, that covered a wide range of topics identified in the insight plans. This included fundraising, demonstrating impact, marketing and comms, effective leadership during change and engaging communities effectively. Over 160 individuals joined us live at these sessions and because we have created a You Tube channel, they have been viewed a further 400 times.

This reinforces the need for a centralised training offer in Phase 2 and that individuals want to be able to access support flexibly in their own time.

4. Growing system alignment

Year 1 delivery has influenced wider system development and we have seen a stronger alignment with place partnerships, local authorities and through system wide work such as the Caring Communities Commission and the Future of Volunteering in Essex.

Common Challenges

1. Low or inconsistent training attendance

Feedback for the face to face partner led activity found that:

- Local training was often under attended despite being insight-led.
- Some Issues with quality, relevance, and trust in some providers.
- Surveys identifying needs did not translate into attendance.

2. Capacity limitations among some community place-based support organisations

Several place-based support delivery partners struggled with delivery, monitoring, or coordination. In some cases, delivery has not yet taken place so we will work with them in order to ensure the support can be delivered in year 2. We have worked with the teams to understand some of the challenges, and some have struggled with a high staff turnover and capacity, others have been reliant on external trainers, who have not delivered high quality provision. Some have not shared participant feedback, so we have been unable to quantify the level of engagement and delivery.

3. The VCS in some instances, is not ready for a community led infrastructure model

The longer term aim of Your Essex Community is to move to a community led model, however reflections from year 1 show limited appetite for organisations to become place-based partners. Despite having an open application for delivery partners, we received limited applications from VCS organisations. Conversations with VCS organisations showed that their priority was the service delivery and internal fundraising, not sector wide capacity building. For some organisations interested, the funding available was not enough to encourage a business plan pivot.

4. Eligibility and expectations

Some providers struggled with the programme criteria and lacked understanding that Your Essex Community funding was to be used to support the infrastructure of the VCS. In some

cases when we received monitoring it was clear that ineligible qualification courses had been delivered. During the application process we received a significant number of ineligible applications to cover staff, service delivery or internal capacity building.

This indicates a need for clearer guidance, stronger pre-screening, and consistent assurance, which will be taken into year 2.

Key Recommendations for Phase 2

While the sector has demonstrated strong local leadership, collaboration and commitment to communities and the Your Essex Community Place-Based Support Offer has been well received by VCS organisations, fundamental challenges raised in the insight gathering phase remain unresolved.

In particular, there is a continued call for greater investment in core costs, alongside support to develop sustainable business models. These longstanding challenges have been further exacerbated by systemwide uncertainty at both local and national level. Organisations report that funding opportunities are becoming less frequent, national funders are shifting their policies away from ongoing support, and local system changes have created a lack of clarity about future priorities and investment.

This has intensified the existing issue that many VCS organisation over rely on short term, project based funding and this continues to reinforce a cycle of fragility. As a result, VCS organisations face increasing difficulty in planning ahead, retaining skilled staff and building the organisational infrastructure needed to deliver sustainable, long term impact. This learning directly informs recommendations for Phase 2:

- Prioritise networking and partnership development as core place-based activity.
- Where appropriate, centralise training through the countywide online series.
- Strengthen delivery expectations and clarify eligibility with place based support partners.
- Support organisational development and resilience within the sector, especially where sustainability is at risk.
- Encourage wider sector leadership through forums, peer learning and communities of practice.
- Raise awareness, challenges and systemic issues that are faced by the VCS with key system partners.