Caring Communities Commission

Essex County Council

Caring Communities Commission Online Community Research

Contents

Project Overview

Research Background

The Caring Communities Commission by Essex County Council, is tasked with delivering transformative solutions to address the **increasing demand on public services**, particularly in social care.

It aims to achieve this by focusing on community-driven approaches to public service reform, emphasising the role of local communities in **alleviating pressures on child and adult care services**.

The core hypothesis driving this research is that communities can play a significant role in reducing the demand on social care services by fostering **local engagement and support systems**.

This could involve neighbourhood groups providing social contact, charitable organisations assisting with administrative tasks, or even developing a more professionalised workforce to support personal care needs.

About the survey

Essex County Council are looking to:

- **Understand Community Contributions to Social Care:** Explore the current role of community organisations in supporting local social care needs.

- **Identify Barriers and Motivations to Community Engagement:** Investigate the factors that make it easier or harder for community groups to operate effectively, including volunteer and community member recruitment, funding, and collaboration with the council currently.

- **Identify Opportunities for Additional Support:** Understand areas which they are looking for support from the council, and what they would need to make their roles easier and more long term.
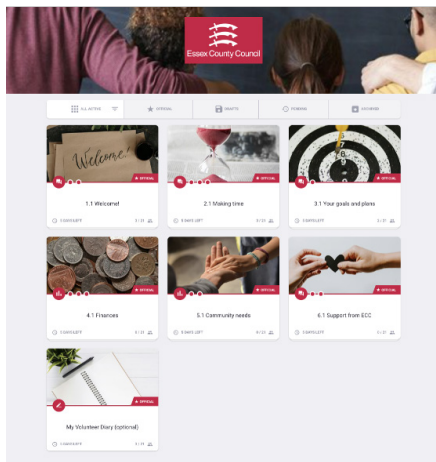
Methodology and Sample

Community preview

'Essex Community'

7 Day online qualitative community

9th-15th December 2024

Activities

6 task sets + diary, open across the whole week

Time commitment

140 minutes

Activity types

Mix of task types, written, image, video

Sample

42 participants who provide some form of community service work in the Essex region:

- 15 full completes (with 11 partial completes)
- Ranging in Age and Gender (skew towards 45+ and female)
- A mix of:
  - roles; from Trustee to Director
  - responsibilities; event planning, admin etc.
  - group types; e.g. sports, faith, charity etc.

The Essex Community: Task Overview

Task Set 1: What they do and why

1.1 Welcome!
Discussion (5 mins)

1.2 Your role in the community!
Survey (10 mins)

1.3 Why you do it
Video (5-10 mins)

Task Set 2: Personal highs and lows of their role

2.1 Making time
Discussion (5-10 mins)

2.2 Remember when...
Discussion (5 mins)

2.3 When things go wrong...
Discussion (5 mins)

2.4 What you think!
Media Map (5 mins)

Task Set 3: The future of their role and the service work they do

3.1 Your goals and plans
Discussion (5 minutes)

3.2 Your future plans
Discussion (5 mins)

Task Set 4: How their service works and the challenges and needs

4.1 Finances
Survey (10 mins)

4.2 Resources and Supplies
Survey (10 mins)

4.3 Attracting volunteers
Survey (10 mins)

4.4 Getting the word out!
Survey (10 mins)

Task Set 5: Community needs and current council support - awareness and attitude towards the council

5.1 Community needs
Survey (10 mins)

5.2 Tell us what you know!
Discussion (5 mins)

5.3 Essex County Council
Discussion (5 mins)

Task Set 6: Ideal Council support - opportunities and recommendations

6.1 Support from ECC
Discussion (5 mins)

6.2 How can they support?
Survey (10 mins)

6.3 Final recommendations!
Discussion (5 mins)

Ongoing Diary (Optional)

Sharing the moment/s they volunteered in the week, how it made them feel, what exactly they did (5 mins per entry)

There are various types of community work occurring in Essex

Organisation type varies

- **12** support / carer charities (IE foodbanks, dementia care, bereavement)
- **6** CIC's (Community Interest Company)
- **2** Religious
- **2** Events organisers
- **2** Fitness and sports
- **1** News / Media
- **1** Accommodation

The number of volunteers per organisation

Ranges from **0 to 140!** (average of 40 volunteers)

Average time spent doing community work

8 years (the longest being 25 years!)

Weekly commitment varies based on employment situation

- employed in community work: **12** full-time (28 hours average), **4** self employed (28 hours average) and **5** part-time (10 hours average)
- not employed in community work: **5** retired and volunteer (14 hours average)

"Our work is to bring casework and advocacy to the migrants of all backgrounds who have been made to feel marginalised or vulnerable in Essex. We have activities every day, sometimes several - ranging form therapeutic gardening to table tennis. We see up to 900 client interactions a week across our various settings and outreach work."

Note: Totalling to 26 to include partial completes. There were 15 full completes.

Community work structures vary, from large and structured to smaller scale

Needs and experiences can vastly differ depending on their workforce, size and organisations structure.

Established organisation member

These organisations are **well established,** with an **employed workforce, as well as volunteers** who are enlisted to help get more large scale operations completed.

These organisations typically have more **distinct roles, schedules, and responsibilities,** as their larger workforce allows for a greater distribution of tasks. Roles include trustee to director.

22 organisation workers were in our sample.

Micro community member

Community organisations which have been set up by **freelancers / sole traders**. They do not have volunteers to help them so they complete all tasks and run the organisation **themselves**. They aim to eventually take on staff and volunteers. They may get finance assistance from accountants so they can focus on community running.

Less structure in terms roles and timings as they are their own boss, typically needing **flexibility** other commitments like family life or part time jobs.

4 freelancers were in our sample.

Note: Based on 26 partial completes

Triggers for Community Action

Community work is often sparked by a unique blend of life experiences and a mindset to help others.

For most, their personal journey is the seed that nurtures their interest and pushes them toward seeking out opportunities to help others; it taps into a sense of purpose and the desire to contribute and give back to society. This internal drive to create positive change transforms intentions into concrete actions, making community work a natural expression of their values and aspirations.

Life experiences - learned trigger

→ **Community work!** ←

Personality traits - innate trigger

- Previous experiences, such as mental health issues, illness in the family, etc.

- Existing ties to the community - e.g. the parish church, working in the council

- Desire to help others thrive

- Self fulfillment from seeing others benefit from their work

- Wanting to fulfill noticeable gaps in the community

- A sense of purpose (especially if retired)

"I do all of the work to do with mental health to help people because I've gone through my own struggles."

"I feel so proud to make people feel so involved in the community."

These triggers foster a deeper motivation to make a positive impact in the community.

Driven by mindset and experience, community members feel compelled to contribute, aiming to provide others with greater opportunities or a more positive experience than they themselves had.

I've been there before

Having experienced a lack of support themselves or wanting to give others the opportunity they had e.g. mental health, weight + exercise challenges, childhood trauma.

"I use my real life experiences to help other people."

Passion project

Working on something they enjoy personally and want others to have that same feeling or experience e.g. music therapy, exercise groups.

"The clients motivate me - they are incredible and face so many barriers but always respond to support."

Passing on wisdom

Having achieved many years of experience, skills and knowledge, and now wanting to share that with others e.g. medical advice and support.

"There was a big need for support for urology cancers. I found was many of the people were asking the same questions."
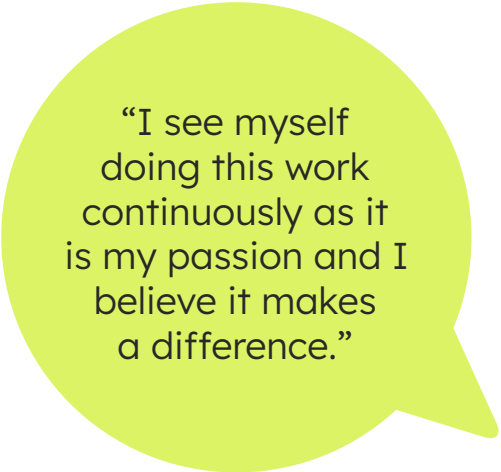
The empath

Witnessing others experience a difficulty or challenge, and wanting to help them through it e.g. caring for family members, support for physical / mental health issues.

"I've always wanted to volunteer and help people and support people. I enjoy the camaraderie."

Motivations

Helping the community creates a sense of fulfillment and reward - this powers their continued commitment.

They continue working in the community as it brings them a deep sense of fulfillment and purpose, knowing their efforts create meaningful benefits for others. These factors fuel their motivation, as their work yields visible and emotional rewards, which reinforces their commitment and passion to keep improving lives in the community.
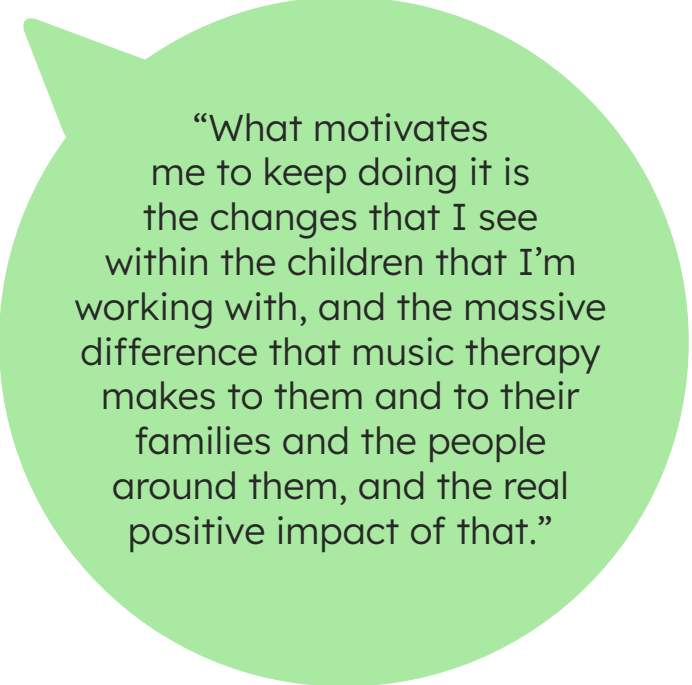
A sense of privilege and pride

They feel a profound sense of personal satisfaction and pride in knowing their efforts bring benefits to others, reinforcing their sense of purpose and self-worth.

Connection

Their work brings people together and they find joy in witnessing the formation of friendships and support networks, knowing they played a part.

Impactful outcomes

Their work leads to tangible, life-changing improvements, such as enhanced mental and physical well-being, which validates the effectiveness and importance of their advocacy and actions.

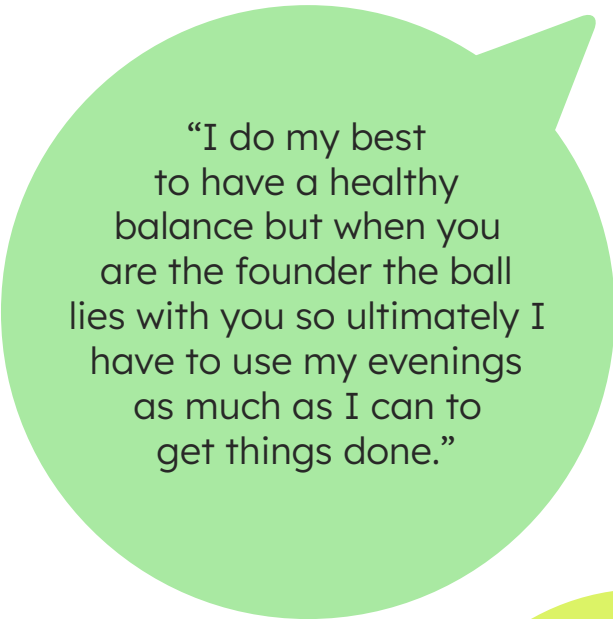"I see myself doing this work continuously as it is my passion and I believe it makes a difference."

"What motivates me to keep doing it is the changes that I see within the children that I'm working with, and the massive difference that music therapy makes to them and to their families and the people around them, and the real positive impact of that."
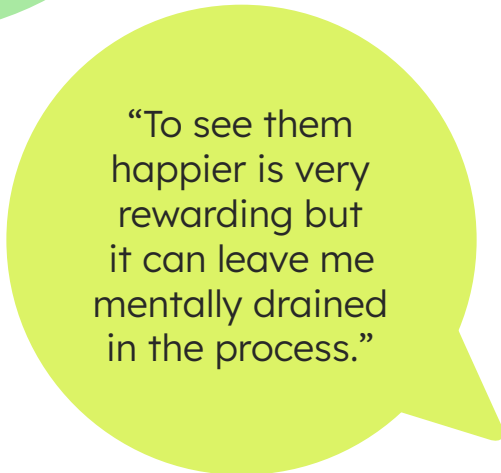
Barriers

While fulfilling, certain challenges can lead to stress, pressure and burnout, which impacts their personal life.

The emotional investment, constant demand, and personal sacrifices required for community work can lead to fatigue, discouragement, and feelings of isolation, impacting their mental and emotional well-being and making it challenging to sustain their efforts long-term.

"I do my best to have a healthy balance but when you are the founder the ball lies with you so ultimately I have to use my evenings as much as I can to get things done."

Emotionally taxing

Members can become personally invested and, due to their care roles and commitment, may find their work emotionally taxing, especially when plans go awry, such as a low turnout. This can lead to disappointment and discouragement.

Always on

Community members, especially those in smaller organisations, often juggle their community work with other commitments, squeezing tasks into evenings and weekends. The constant need to stay engaged can be draining and difficult to manage, leading to physical and mental exhaustion.

Lack of balance

Micro community workers:

In striving to meet their commitments, they may sacrifice personal time, such as missing family moments or social events. Over time, this lack of balance can lead to feelings of isolation and a sense of disconnection from their personal lives.

"To see them happier is very rewarding but it can leave me mentally drained in the process."

Overcoming Barriers

To overcome these challenges, community members lean on the support of their personal network.

Working with the community demands flexibility, patience, and strong time management skills. A solid support system is essential to ensure they can meet community needs while maintaining high standards in all their responsibilities.

Community members rely on a **supportive inner circle** to effectively manage their time and can act as **emotional support** when things get tough.

This support helps them balance the demands of their work, as many others depend on them.

Some note the importance of planning their community work in a way that **minimises disruption** to their family life.

This is especially difficult for those who run their organisations alone, as they have **no one to share the workload with** and often have to spend more out of hours time on their community work.
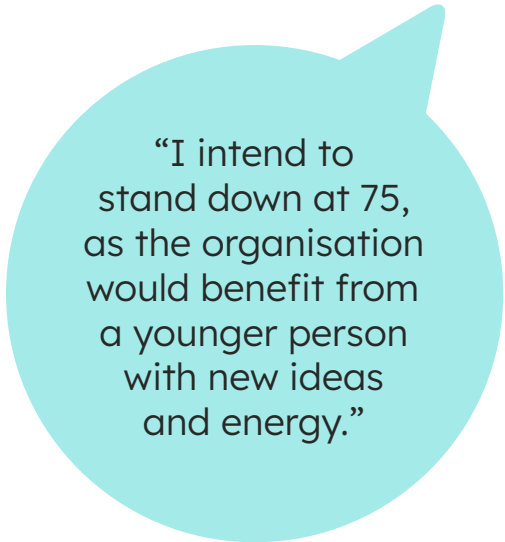
Group
members

Extended
family

Children

Parents

Pets

Partner

Friends

Community
members
via social
media

Volunteers

Employers

Why Community Members Stay Involved

Ultimately, community members remain committed for the foreseeable future - passion outweighs fatigue.

The majority do not see themselves stepping away from their community role anytime soon, as their passion, sense of fulfillment, and the positive impact of their work far outweigh any challenges or demands they face.

"I don't see my role changing in the future, as I am very passionate about the support group and I will continue while the group grows stronger and for more members to gradually take over the running if I am unable to do so."

"I intend to stand down at 75, as the organisation would benefit from a younger person with new ideas and energy."

Committed to the cause
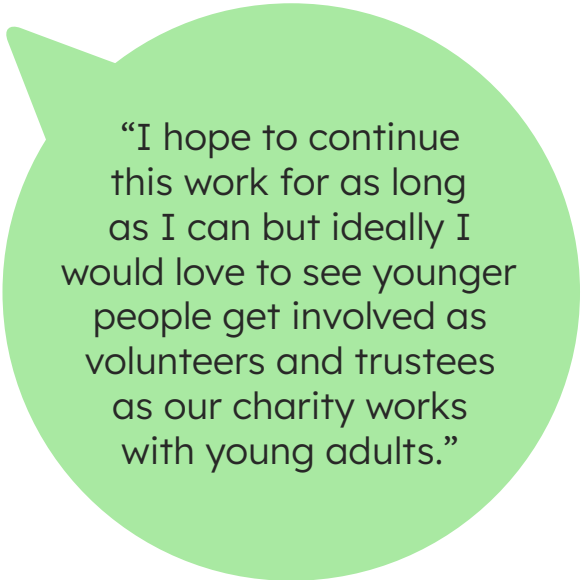
Due to relationships built, they would not want to leave their members in the lurch, they are committed to working and supporting them.

It's part of who they are

Many have been working with the community for years, seeing this as a role they will always do because it provides them with a sense of purpose.

Pros outweigh cons

Overall, they enjoy what they do, and accept the challenges because they find joy in their work and they people they support.

"I hope to continue this work for as long as I can but ideally I would love to see younger people get involved as volunteers and trustees as our charity works with young adults."

A minority could see ending their community work. This is often due to personal factors (such as health) or life stage (feel they are too old to continue).

Short-term needs vs. long-term goals

Due to the nature of community work, members are mostly focused on short-term needs vs. long-term goals.

Most would like to achieve bigger picture goals, but the unpredictable nature and logistical issues involved with community work make planning long-term a challenge.

"Longer term is far more difficult [to plan for] as it is so difficult to see younger volunteers coming forward."

Short-term: Immediate day-to-day operations

- Ensuring core business aims are being met - ensuring community members needs are met, i.e. their groups are running smoothly
- Dealing with immediate needs e.g. find a bigger premises
- Looking for funding options in order to boost their support
- Increasing fundraising to break even each month
- Establishing a fixed timetable/ schedule for their sessions (e.g. fitness classes)

Long-term: Strategic planning for future growth

- Developing new services, based on what is needed in the community
- Developing working relationships and networking with other organisations
- Looking for new volunteers and aiming to employ paid staff as the group expands
- Encouraging more input and ideas from the community to improve their offerings
- Gaining trust and rapport from the community

To deep dive into the inner workings of their community work and explore the day-to-day challenges, we explored four key areas:

Community Challenges

Finance

Resourcing

Attracting Volunteers

Engaging Service Users

Finance

Community organisations face diverse financial needs, from daily operations to funding strategic growth.

"Our main cost goes on venues, providing services such as music therapy and complementary therapy but due to our limited finances we haven't started thinking what else we could use."

What they need to finance

- **Operational costs** (e.g., hall rentals, staffing, insurance, resources and equipment)
- **Specialised services** (e.g., music therapy, complementary therapy, or mental health support services)
- **Growth and stability** (for ongoing programs, strategic planning, and crisis responses)

How they raise finances

Community engagement activities

Such as raffles, bake sales, fundraising events, and donor campaigns, are highly effective for fostering local connections and building goodwill.

However, their success depends significantly on volunteer availability and sustained community enthusiasm, both of which can fluctuate over time.

For example, a micro community member successfully runs bingo nights and raffles but finds it hard to sustain this model as volunteer availability varies.

Grants from councils, national bodies, and benefactors

These offer vital support for specific projects, enabling growth and crisis response.

However, the process is resource-intensive, requiring detailed applications and reporting.

For example, a micro community member flags that many grants come with short-term horizons, making it difficult to engage in long-term planning or strategic growth.

Generating income

Through service fees, product sales, or space rentals provides a valuable and often steady revenue stream for community organisations.

However, balancing affordability with sustainability can be challenging, particularly when serving communities with limited financial means.

For example, a micro community member charges modest fees for their classes to ensure accessibility but struggles to cover all their operational costs or themself a wage.

Finance

There are many hidden struggles behind financial success in community organisations.

Financial stability is deeply tied to strong community connections, skilled financial management, and creative fundraising approaches. Yet, behind these successes often lies immense effort and emotional strain as leaders juggle financial demands with limited resources.

Limited Financial Management Capacity

Many community members find themselves stretched thin, managing finances alone while juggling other critical priorities. The demands of daily financial tasks leave them little room for big-picture planning or exploring new opportunities to increase their funds.

"I need time to be able to do all the admin as well as time to prep for all the sessions—or someone to share the workload with."

Grant and Fundraising Challenges

The complexity of grant applications and competition for funding add layers of frustration. Many feel grant systems are not designed with small community organisations in mind, leading to feelings of exclusion or defeat. This is exacerbated by the high stakes involved, every decline feels like a missed opportunity to serve the community better.

"There is certainly a need to simplify the application process for grants for small organisations."

Unpredictable Income and Rising Costs

The unpredictability of funding, inflation and increasing operational expenses, creates constant uncertainty. Community members often worry about keeping the lights on or affording crucial services, such as therapy programs.

"The cost of living crisis has meant that fundraisers are giving less or reluctant to ask their friends and family to give. The rate of inflation has meant we have had to increase staff salaries and the National Insurance increase will affect us."

Finance

Community members could benefit from simplified grant processes and additional funding & resources.

1 **Streamline Grant Application Processes**
Simplify forms or introduce options like video interviews to reduce administrative burdens and make funding more accessible.

2 **Simplify Banking and Strengthen Local Partnerships**
Improve charity banking processes and collaborate with councils to provide office space and funding support, reducing operational challenges.

3 **Provide Flexible and Long-Term Funding**
Offer multi-year grants, recurring small grants, and discretionary funds to support long-term planning and immediate needs.

4 **Enhance Resource Access and Education**
Develop a central funding directory and provide training in financial education: such as grant writing and financial management to improve accessibility.

5 **Fund Financial and Administrative Support Roles**
Support organisations in hiring finance or fundraising staff to improve efficiency and reduce the workload on community members.

Note: These suggestions are based on direct Member feedback

Resourcing

Community organisations require a wide range of resources and supplies to sustain their operations.

> "We need paper, pens, colouring materials, tea, coffee, hall hire, [and] third-party contractors such as our massage therapist or guest speakers."

What they need

- **Venues and facilities** (e.g., community halls and therapy rooms)
- **Supplies and equipment** (e.g., consumables, specialised equipment, technology)
- **Third-Party Services and Contractors** (e.g. music therapists, guest speakers, IT managers)

How they attain these resources

- **Donations,** both monetary and in-kind, are a cornerstone of resource acquisition. These contributions range from food for food banks to art supplies and second-hand equipment. While these donations are invaluable, they rely heavily on public goodwill and consistent community engagement, which can vary over time.

- **Grants** often fund larger expenses, such as purchasing equipment or hiring venues, while **fundraising efforts** including raffles and events, fill financial gaps. This approach is effective but requires significant time and effort, particularly when competition for grants is high and fundraising depends on volunteer availability.

- **Volunteers** are critical for managing resources, from sourcing supplies to coordinating activities. Their contributions save costs and bring diverse skills to the table. However, maintaining consistent volunteer support and communication, especially across shifts, can be challenging.

- Community members frequently use their **own resources**, such as personal laptops or vehicles, to bridge gaps. **Small-scale purchasing**, like sourcing supplies from budget-friendly vendors or online platforms, provides flexibility but can become time-intensive and financially burdensome for those involved.

Resourcing

It can be a struggle to sustain services: balancing limited resources, rising costs, and volunteer reliance.

Time and Capacity

Many struggle with the **time-intensive nature of resource management,** due to limited support and a lack of delegation options. Resourcing can be time intensive due to the **planning involved** and **the need to seek approval** from others on resourcing costs.

"My main challenge is time management; it can take quite a while shopping and planning the things we need."

Dependence on Volunteers

Volunteers play a **critical role** in resource management, from sourcing supplies to coordinating activities. While these contributions save costs and bring in essential skills, **maintaining and motivating volunteers remains a challenge.**

"Maintaining the volunteer commitment and ensuring good communication between the teams who work at different times (shifts)."

Financial Constraints

Limited budgets make it difficult to replace aging equipment, afford venues, or hire contractors. In addition, **rising costs for compliance** (e.g., health and safety) and council guidelines further strain finances, reducing budgets for resourcing.

"I am desperate for a new laptop as my one is ten years old and on its last legs! I need to source media equipment but I can't afford it."

Availability and Accessibility

Finding affordable venues, equipment, and supplies is often challenging. High-demand resources, like community halls or specialised contractors, are **frequently unavailable** or **too costly,** limiting organisations' ability to deliver essential services.

"In our new Town we are badly in need of additional community venue resources, the Village Hall and Town Hall are fully booked."

Resourcing

Community resourcing could be improved through targeted support and collaborative solutions.

1 ### Provide Targeted Resource Support

Offer grants for expenses such as equipment, venue hire, professional services, and specialised resources like music therapy or laptops. Additionally, offer a curated list of trusted suppliers and resources to help organisations find reliable and cost-effective solutions.

2 ### Streamline Grant Processes

Streamline application forms and approval processes to simplify and accelerate access to funding for resources, reducing bureaucratic hurdles and minimising the administrative burden of resourcing on community members.

3 ### Encourage Collaborative Resource Sharing

Foster partnerships among local organisations for shared resources like office space, administrative support, or bulk purchasing of supplies, to strengthen community collaboration and lower operational costs.

4 ### Provide Training and Guidance

Provide hands-on training in resource management, fundraising strategies, and volunteer recruitment to help community leaders strengthen their skillset and ensure long-term sustainability.

5 ### Promote Volunteer Engagement

Partner with local organisations to run volunteer recruitment campaigns. Act as a central hub to connect volunteers with groups in need, support flexible roles, and provide resources for training, ensuring a sustainable and motivated volunteer base.

Note: These suggestions are based on direct Member feedback

Attracting Volunteers

Members try to attract volunteers in various ways, as they're essential to the smooth running of their work.

"We need volunteers to undertake a wide range of tasks; collecting food from donation points across the town; sorting and date checking donations; packing and delivering food to households; re-stocking shelves after collections and deliveries; monitoring stock and reserves; helping with fund-raising activities."

Why they need volunteers

Community organisations rely heavily on volunteers to deliver services and manage operations, performing essential tasks such as:

- **Setting up venues**
- **Managing resources**
- **Fundraising**
- **Delivering programs**

How they attract volunteers

Word of mouth (WOM)

This tends to be the most common recruitment tool. Many volunteers are referred by friends or family members who already volunteer.

"It's the volunteers themselves who encourage friends or people they know to offer as volunteers."

Social media platforms and local advertising

These are also effective tools for outreach throughout Essex.

Community members can use social media posts to call for support, or advertise in the village Magazine.

Community events

Engaging directly with residents at community events provides an opportunity to share their organisation's mission and attract new volunteers.

Community member attends events and talks to people about their group's work as a way to inspire involvement.

Existing networks

Some community members leverage existing networks, such as town councils or online volunteer directories, to reach a wider audience.

Community member uses platforms like The Fore to connect with skilled volunteers.

Attracting Volunteers

However, many struggle with attracting and retaining volunteers with adequate skills.

Commitment Levels

Many people are **reluctant to commit** to volunteering due to time constraints, family or work obligations, or the fear of overcommitment. This is **especially difficult for weekends,** which is necessary for most community groups.

"People don't like being on committees. Most would prefer just to help on the day so they are not committed/responsible."

Access to Specific Skills

Finding volunteers with particular **expertise**, such as fundraising or marketing, can be challenging. A **lack of formal training** opportunities for volunteers further limits their ability to take on specialised roles.

"Training can also be a problem. The wrong help can be worse than no help."

Awareness & Accessibility

Small organisations are often **overlooked by corporate volunteer programmes**. In addition, some roles require **specific qualifications**, such as DBS checks, or physical strength which can **limit the pool of potential volunteers,** particularly as groups currently struggle to engage younger volunteers.

"People also need a DBS to work with us and this sometimes puts people off."

Resource Constraints

Managing and supporting volunteers requires **funding, policies, and administrative time,** which are often lacking as they are not the priority when other jobs need doing to keep the community work moving along.

"Voluntary and community work has been increasingly burdened by bureaucracy. "

Attracting Volunteers

Community groups could benefit from recruitment training and promotion to attract and retain volunteers.

1 Streamline Recruitment Tools

Create a centralised database or pool of potential volunteers that organisations can access as needed.

2 Provide Training Programmes

Offer subsidised or free training for skills like first aid and event management, empowering volunteers to take on more responsibilities confidently.

3 Incentivise Volunteering

Fund and promote initiatives that reward volunteers, such as awards, events, or reimbursement. Encourage employers to support through tax relief or other benefits, enabling employees to contribute time regularly.

4 Promote Opportunities

Help organisations by promoting their volunteer opportunities in schools, colleges, hospitals and youth organisations to attract volunteers.

5 Engage the Youth

Promote volunteering as a powerful skill-building tool for career advancement, as this group is difficult to recruit currently.

Note: These suggestions are based on direct Member feedback

Engaging Service Users

Inclusive, tailored outreach is vital to engage diverse groups and overcome barriers such as isolation.

"The people that use my service are people who are often struggling in some way with things i.e. loneliness, mental health, social isolation. I have people come from all genders and a very wide age range."

Organisations need effective communication strategies to reach diverse audiences, ranging from retirees and young families to individuals with specific challenges such as loneliness, mental health issues, disabilities, or immigration struggles.

How they engage with their Service Users

- Many organisations rely on **traditional methods** including word of mouth, local magazines, and posters placed in public spaces such as GP surgeries and supermarkets to spread the word about their services.

- Some lean on **partnerships** - collaborating with schools, councils and health professionals to help them reach a wider audience and connect with different community groups.

- **Digital tools** like websites and social media platforms are also commonly used to maintain an active online presence and share updates with their communities.

- **Regular newsletters** and **community events** help keep service users informed and engaged while fostering a sense of connection.

- **Networking with local authority organisations** ensures broader awareness and integration with other services while smaller organisations often rely on **personal networks** for outreach due to limited resources and a lack of structured support.

Engaging Service Users

Engaging service users is challenging due to limited resources, low visibility, and hard-to-reach audiences.

Barriers to Participation

Lack of reliable transportation makes it **difficult for people to attend** events or access services, while social anxiety and **concerns about judgement** keep others from participating. These barriers **directly reduce attendance** and involvement, limiting the impact of community outreach efforts.

"Nerves! The unknown is what holds people back, it's hard walking into a room of people you may not know."

Resource Limitations

Limited funding makes it **difficult to invest in communication tools** like professional marketing materials, websites, or translation services. This lack of resources **reduces their ability to reach diverse populations,** (non-English speakers or those who require specialised outreach) **limiting their ability to engage** and support a broader audience.

"A free langauge service or funds for it [would help]- so far we rely heavily onstaff who have other roles to also translate."

Engaging Youth

Attracting younger audiences is a major challenge. Young people are increasingly engaged digitally, yet many community members **lack the resources, expertise, or strategies** to effectively connect with them online. Traditional events often **fail to resonate** with younger generations, resulting in low participation from this key demographic.

"Youngsters have other interests than the community. What do people get back for volunteering?"

Accessibility Gaps

Members feel like news about their organisations **doesn't have enough reach** within their local community. Smaller community organisations feel they **lack the recognition from the local community** and so advertising from them may be missed or ignored.

"We need information to reach our target group and the opportunity to speak to statuary organisations to let them know we are here and what we do."

Engaging Service Users

Community outreach and engagement could be enhanced by implementing the following strategies.

1

Boost Publicity and Outreach

Launch campaigns to produce and distribute materials (e.g. flyers, newsletters) targeting offline audiences. Create and promote centralised platforms or networks to showcase community events and services for easy access.

2

Strengthen Collaboration with Key Stakeholders

Partner with GPs, district nurses, and local councils to actively promote awareness and referrals. Advocate for statutory organisations to actively involve local charities in their outreach initiatives.

3

Expand Communication Tools

Provide grants or support to fund translation services, reaching non-English speaking communities effectively. Secure free or discounted access to high-visibility venues, such as high streets, for better visibility.

4

Engage and Empower Youth

Leverage youth-oriented platforms and form school partnerships to engage younger audiences. Advertise relevant community groups within schools and colleges to attract younger service users.

5

Support with Clear Messaging & Branding

Offer training programs to help organisations sharpen their messaging, vision, and mission. Support the creation of compelling narratives and testimonials that inspire action and community involvement.

Note: These suggestions are based on direct Member feedback

Bridging the gap between Communities and the Council

Community members note a hierarchical structure with ECC being the overarching authority.

While this hierarchy can be maintained with core communication and support going through the local council, Essex CC is slightly disconnected. A direct communication channel from ECC may speed up certain processes and help to relay information more effectively.

"Chelmsford council were hugely supportive of me when I first set Ace up, mostly because I had a contact there. Essex County Council tend to be very slow with making payments and also difficult to connect with, I often meet councillors who say they will help me and then they never actually follow up or do anything."

County Council i.e. Essex County Council

ECC are seen as an **overarching support network,** working closely with local councils but not often directly with communities and organisations, giving a sense of disconnection from the communities day to day community work.

Local Council

Many communities reach out to their local council as a **first and main point of contact.** Community members tend to be **more aware of the support the local council offers** and they feel the local council are more knowledgeable of the area and situations.

Parish Council

Depending on location, some communities **turn to their local parish for support.** This could be for **minor funding, tools, resources and promotion** etc.

Their Organisations

Before reaching out to higher up in the hierarchy, community members can get **finances and resources** through **donations,** which in turn can be used to source **volunteers and promote services** themselves.

As a result, ECC is not top of mind when it comes to support or collaboration for their community work.

Current experiences with ECC rarely relate to their community work, it tends to revolve around networking and funding.

Who they are currently in contact with

Core contacts commonly mentioned are **county councillors** and **'service officers'** who work for ECC; noting good relationships with these contacts as they build with more time and experience.

How they first got in contact with ECC

These relationships typically involve having existing ECC connections through **prior community work or past ECC employment.**

What services they receive from ECC

Support from ECC tends to only be **funding** via grants, as other support needs are usually met from local councils. Some express a **need for more consistent support** and more communication from ECC.

Those with no experiences with ECC do not instantly think of reaching out to them for support.

Perceptions largely come from **not knowing what ECC can offer to them,** or even assuming there is no support for their type of community group. Meaning they opt for public donations and local council support - when support needs to be escalated, many are unsure on how to do so.

This could suggest there is a **lack of communication** and information channels, leading to **little promotion** of ECC services available.

There's a **desire to learn more** about what is on offer!

"To be honest I am not aware of any support that Essex County Council provide or offer to CIC's as I am very new to this world."

"My overall impression of the services provided are positive. Especially during lockdown, we received grants from the council. I would value the opportunity to have more contact with departments / officials to discuss ways in which our service might receive more consistent support."

Connecting Community Groups through a Central Network

A centralised network for collaboration, resources, and support to streamline and enhance community work.

Connect them with like minded people in other organisations

A directory of suitable venues, contractors, and other resources

A central network for those working within the community...

Have a list of community members willing to volunteer their time

Work with local councils to have a point of contact

Those working in the community want a streamlined network in which they can communicate with the council, volunteers and other community groups similar to their own.

This will help them ensure they are aware of, and have access to potential support.

They look to ECC to provide this information, networking opportunities and training resources in one central, online location.

"Establish a network for voluntary organisations to engage with the council for sharing of information and identifying resources to develop services."

Improving ECC Services

Promotion, Accessibility and Communication are among top themes for how ECC services can be improved on.

Theme	Impacts on service users	Solution
Promotion	**Communities are unsure of ECC services on offer**, highlighting a lack of promotion and communication to inform community members of their best options	As current promotion feels too tailored to social media, some demographics are likely to miss out. **Increase promotion efforts via other methods** like community outreach and events
Accessibility (physically and logistically)	**Location, transport, and strict eligibility requirements** can prevent accessing certain services. These suggest a need for more **inclusive and accessible** service provision	**Improving transport infrastructure and providing additional support** for application processes can ease these barriers
Direct communication	As ECC is seen an an overarching support network, with local councils being main points of contact, service users would appreciate **more direct communication with ECC**	Participants indicated that having **named contacts or more obvious points of reference within the council** could strengthen relationships and improve communication

Note: These suggestions are based on direct Member feedback

Key focus areas

Community members were shown the commission's key focus areas and invited to share insights on how the public sector could enhance its efforts in these aspects.

Healthy Communities

Communities that promote physical, mental, and social well-being by providing access to resources such as healthcare services, recreational facilities, and healthy food options.

Inclusive Communities

Communities that embrace diversity, promote social equity, reduce discrimination, and ensure equal opportunity for all members.

Connected Communities

Communities with strong social networks and accessible services.

Engaged Communities

Communities where members are encouraged to actively participate and have a voice in decision-making and control over local resources.

To improve health and inclusivity: collaboration, training, and engagement are vital to support all groups effectively.

Note: These suggestions are based on direct Member feedback

Healthy Communities

1

Improving mental health support

There is a need for more resources and early mental health intervention. Councils need to direct community members to the right support.

2

Early Intervention

Working with agencies such as schools, colleges, GPs and community groups to identify and support members before they reach a point of crisis.

3

Agency Collaboration

Collaboration between agencies (e.g. GPs/schools) and community groups is essential to connect individuals in need, with supportive community resources.

Inclusive Communities

1

Inclusivity Training

Councils could facilitate education and training on how best to support marginalised groups and their needs, so all community members feel seen.

2

Beating the stigma

All community members should have access to exercise without fear of being judged. Ensure all messaging around health and wellness is inclusive and accessible.

3

Community Engagement

Community groups feel councils could communicate better with the community and directly ask them about their needs, to best support all groups.

To increase engagement and connectivity: enhance group awareness, foster relationships and ensure inclusivity.

Note: These suggestions are based on direct Member feedback

Connected Communities

1 **Improve local infrastructure and transport**

Improve transport options, reduce potholes, and provide easy access footpaths to ensure mobility and safety when attending community groups and events.

2 **Increase awareness**

Greater local awareness of community services and events could lead to increased attendance and engagement, increasing connections within the community.

3 **Improve relationships**

Increase involvement with by having officials visit, engage with, and directly ask about their needs, fostering stronger relationships and deeper understanding.

Engaged Communities

1 **Ensure everyone feels heard**

Ensure all groups are included within comms and advertising, so no one feels left out or un-represented by their local council.

2 **Increase community advertising**

Provide advertising opportunities and training for community groups, to increase awareness of their classes/ sessions/ support to the wider community.

3 **Educate the youth**

Visit schools and educate about the benefits of community voluntary activities on mental wellbeing, career advancement and improving social skills.

1

Community work structures vary from established organisations, through to micro community work

There is a vast range of community work in Essex with many community members working with the community at a professional capacity, whilst others are volunteering their time and skills outside their jobs and other commitments.

The varied structures means that experience and needs vastly differ from organisation to organisation, and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is not applicable.

2

As expected, community contributions are driven by a deep motivation to make a positive impact

For the majority, community work is triggered by a desire to help others; this can be triggered by their own personal experience, seeing a gap in the community, or a desire to help others in whatever way they can.

This internal motivation means they find their work self-fulfilling and a source of pride, resulting in a strong commitment to their role and helping their community.

3

For the majority, community work is their full time role, however some work part-time while they get their own freelance initiatives off the ground

For the majority, their roles are full-time commitments, with some having worked in similar roles for over 10 years. These roles often include resourcing, organising and running groups/event days for people in the local community.

On the other hand, freelancers have to do everything alone, often sacrificing personal time to get everything done to a standard they are happy with.

4

Community members feel the toll of the work, and rely on their social network for support

Working with the community often can be fatiguing, emotionally draining and disappointing at times, due to the often personal nature of their role.

As a result of this, community members rely on their close social circle to support them logistically (time management, taking on household chores) and emotionally, so they can do their community work to the best of their ability.

5

Resource constraints, including funding, time, and volunteer availability, are key challenges

Resource constraints present significant challenges for community groups, with limited funding, time, and volunteer availability often hindering their efforts.

Many organisations struggle to balance their goals with the resources at their disposal, making it difficult to sustain or expand their initiatives. Addressing these constraints is critical to ensuring long-term success and impact.

6

Inclusivity and accessibility need to be improved to increase community engagement across all areas of the community

Community members emphasise that accessibility to community groups poses a significant challenge, particularly for elderly and disabled individuals.

To address this, there is a clear need for improvements in public transportation, better promotion of available groups, and ensuring that these groups are held in fully accessible venues, fostering an environment where everyone feels included and welcomed.

7 **Collaboration with the council currently is low, suggesting low visibility/promotion of the support available**

Current experiences with Essex County Council is limited (with a few mentioning grants only). Community members want to interact more with the council but are unaware how to, or find the processes time consuming or confusing.

Increased direct communication is needed to boost interaction with the council, to show community members that support is available if they need it.

8 **A central network is essential to foster collaboration and reduce the sense of isolation in community work across Essex**

Community members highlight a gap in collaboration and resource sharing. They look to ECC to fill this gap with a centralised network which can connect them to volunteers and like-minded organisations so they can share knowledge and resourcing.

Community members report that working in the community can feel isolating, but being in touch with others like them could work to bridge this gap and create more of a connected community in Essex.

9 **Community groups see ECC's key roles as: training, marketing guidance and financial support**

Community groups view Essex County Council as a vital source of support in areas where they lack expertise or resources. Community organisations, often reliant on volunteers, may not have access to the necessary training or skills, particularly in finance and marketing. These groups look to ECC to bridge these gaps by offering free resources and guidance that empower them to enhance their services.

Moving forward - Considerations for the Caring Communities Commission

Develop a marketing strategy to engage prospective community members

To increase awareness and appeal among businesses and individuals who may be able to contribute to the community:

- Review the current communication flow and ensure local councils and Parishes have the right information to pass down to community members regarding future comms from the Caring Communities Commission. Also consider additional efforts to promote the Caring Communities Commission direct to the community, in order to raise awareness of their purpose and solutions, going beyond social media.

- The tone and message of comms should resonate and trigger motivation (page **14**)

- Any call to action messaging should be supported with easy and accessible communication channels e.g. email, phone number, subscribe box, QR code

- Consider developing a new starter brochure or comms pack to help explain how they could support the community, resources available etc. and address common challenges with solutions e.g. facilities and tools to support wellbeing

- Promotional comms should bring to life the impact and effectiveness of charitable and support work in the community e.g. Statistics, use cases

Investigate ways to support members 'community-life-balance'

To help current community members continue their work in a more sustainable way, provide resources that support them:

- Develop a toolkit of advice, guidance and solutions which help community members gain a better community-life-balance e.g. remember to take a break and have respite, ways to balance commitments, time management

- Explore support for those with emotional challenges or burnout due to the community work they do e.g. information or discounted access to therapy or counselling

- Develop information sources that highlight common life challenges and concerns and solutions; to help them recognise that they are not alone and they can be supported

- Explore ways to praise, reward and connect community members e.g. host events, annual (national) awards to show appreciation

Note: These suggestions are driven by incling's analysis of participants feedback. Considerations are not direct suggestions from participants

Moving forward - Considerations for the Caring Communities Commission

Explore practical solutions and resources

Identify solutions that can help community members gain more structure and stability (thus improve how they support service users):

- Refer to pages **26**, **29**, **32**, **36**, **40** and **41** for participant driven suggestions in key areas: Finance, resourcing, attracting volunteers, engaging service users, the Community Care Commissions key focus areas

- Develop relationships with transport/taxi services to help lower travel costs for community members, volunteers and service users. Also potentially working with transport authorities to create discounted bus, rail tickets for community workers

- Create an online hub that hosts all tools, resources and information for community members to use, becoming a centralised network for collaboration, resources and support

- Create a space for networking e.g. other community members, individuals who are interested in volunteering

- Develop a directory so community members know which local authority teams to contact, a directory of partners, resources, suppliers etc

- Develop information on the 'business' of community work e.g. marketing their service to the public, ways to scale their operation

Note: These suggestions are driven by incling's analysis of participants feedback. Considerations are not direct suggestions from participants

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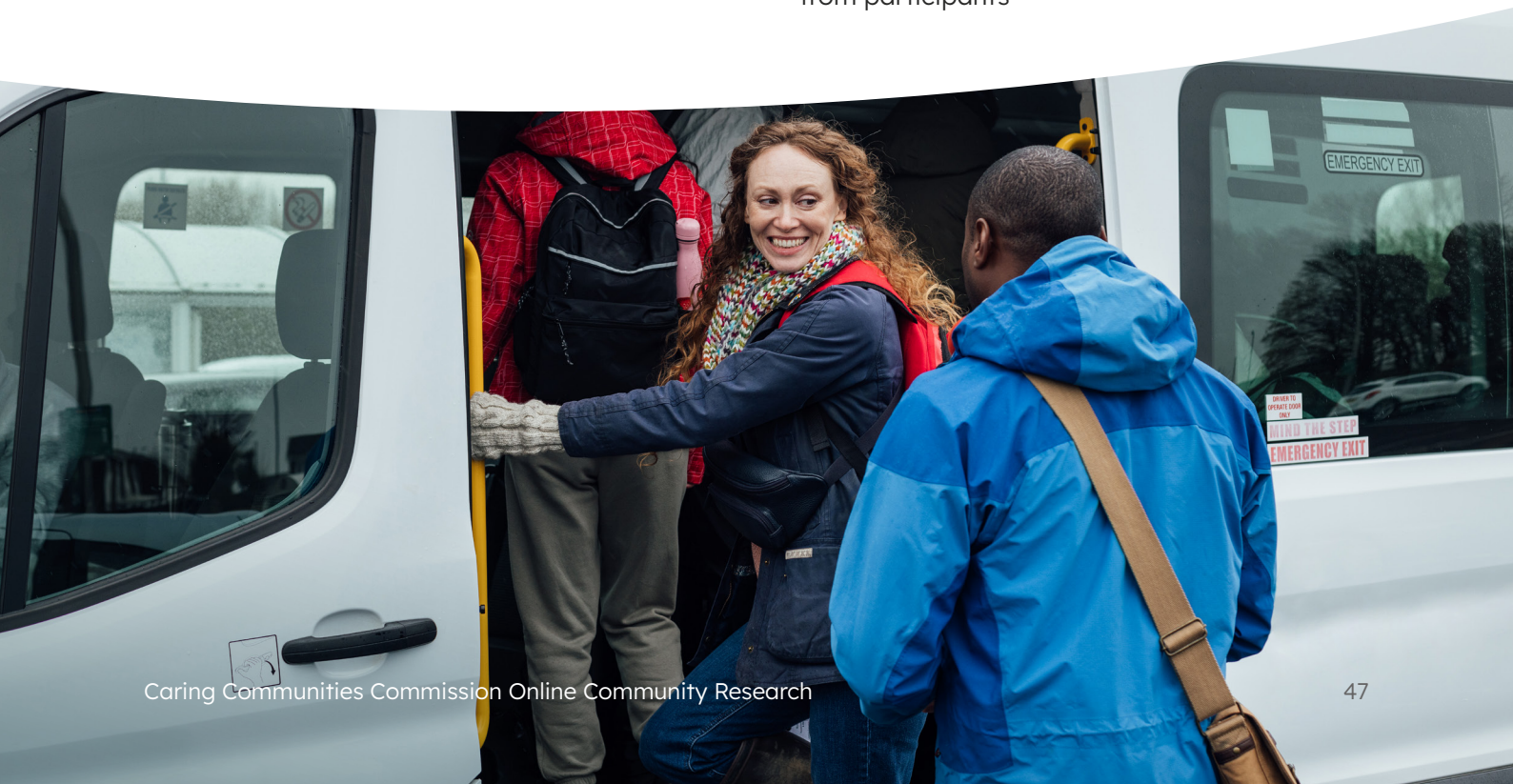
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