

Thriving Communities Programme Evaluation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

November 2021



Introduction and Context

The Thriving Communities programme is a flagship programme delivered by the Oldham Cares Partnership. The programme makes up part of Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council's (OMBC) 'Oldham Model'. The model is complemented and underpinned by a focus on two key enablers – public service reform and empowering people and communities.

In 2018, £2.69m was agreed to fund the Thriving Communities programme from Greater Manchester as part of the GM Health and Social Care transformation fund to support devolution. The aim was to accelerate the Thriving Communities element of the Oldham Model and deliver the common objectives of our health and social care integration.

The programme was established with the intention of creating the conditions for sustainable prevention, linking people into community capacity, social action and change. There are three workstreams to the programme; Social Prescribing, Social Action Fund and Fast Grants.

Social Prescribing Innovation Partnership

A Social Prescribing network was commissioned for the borough by Oldham Cares through an innovation partnership from April 2019 to March 2022. This partnership is led by infrastructure organisation Action Together and comprised of Tameside, Oldham and Glossop Mind, Positive Steps, Age UK and Altogether Better.

Social Action Fund

The Social Action Fund made £850,000 available to fund five projects over a three-year period. Applications set out how their project would contribute towards:

- Tackling social isolation in Oldham
- Being transformational / innovative either in the delivery approach or the system change made within the VCFSE sector, with the public or enterprise
- Improving the mental health, physical health and wellbeing of people in Oldham
- Supporting a reduction in the pressure on health services
- Taking a strength-based approach to working with people

Fast Grants

Fast Grants is a 3-year rolling programme of small grants of up to £500. These grants focussed on funding small scale community innovation by grass roots community groups and organisations, with the aim of being accessible and getting funding to community groups quickly. Funds were allocated to meet four priorities of the fund:

- Supporting the community to be fit and healthy
- Developing skills of local people
- Changing the area for the better
- Encouraging community participation

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation framework asked four key questions:

- What is the impact for the people referred into Social Prescribing or funded activities?
- What is the impact on the public service system?
- What is the impact on local VCFSE sector?
- How effectively has the model been implemented?

A Mixed Methods Approach

The evaluation has been completed using a mixed methods approach. This combined qualitative research and analysis to gather and understand stakeholders' experiences, perceptions and attitudes towards the programme, with quantitative research and analysis to determine if the target outputs and outcomes of the programme had been delivered. This mixed method approach also combines primary and secondary research. Primary data has been collected throughout the delivery of the programme and additional fieldwork has been undertaken during the evaluation to complement existing primary data. Primary fieldwork has collected approximately 2,000 unique qualitative data points and over 75,000 unique quantitative data points. Secondary data from existing Oldham Council datasets as well as nationally recognised datasets and methodologies have also been utilised.



Findings and Analysis

In addition to data collected throughout programme delivery, primary data collection and fieldwork was undertaken between April and September 2021. This included completing comprehensive stakeholder engagement with 1:1 sessions, focus groups and workshops and surveys with stakeholders from across the Oldham system, including service users and project participants.

Findings and analysis is presented as four sub-sections:

1. Overview of the programme:
 - a. Thematic Analysis
 - b. Return on Investment modelling
2. Social Prescribing
 - a. Qualitative feedback from each stakeholder group
 - b. Quantitative analysis of Social Prescribing cohort
 - c. Case studies
3. Social Action Fund
 - a. Qualitative feedback from each stakeholder group
 - b. Quantitative analysis of SAF cohorts
 - c. Case studies: Project review
4. Fast Grants
 - a. Qualitative feedback from each stakeholder group
 - b. Quantitative analysis of Fast Grants awarded
 - c. Case studies: Project review by priority

Overview of Programme

Thematic Analysis

Throughout the engagement programme, five key themes emerged from stakeholders. The themes had both positive and negative connotations but together represent the thoughts, experiences and perceptions of the 100+ stakeholders who participated in the evaluation. These have been summarised into five themes:

- Theme 1: Defining 'Thriving Communities'
- Theme 2: System-wide Value of VCFSE in Service Delivery
- Theme 3: Approaches to Partnership and System Working
- Theme 4: Community Capacity and Capability
- Theme 5: Governance and Administration

Findings and Analysis

Financial Return on Investment Modelling

Creating a financial return-on-investment for programmes of this kind is notoriously difficult. Combining data gathered throughout the programme and primary research throughout the evaluation, we are able to estimate a financial ROI based on a series of values to create a formula that presents the impact of every £1 spent on social prescribing.

The programme data shows that Social Prescribing is projected to deliver 300 'pure' deflections from social care services each year. A 'pure' deflection is defined as an individual previously on the social care waiting list whose needs were supported by Social Prescribing and no longer required input from social care services.

For every £1 spent on Social Prescribing services there is potential cost avoidance of between £1.97 and £3.94 in social care.

This implies potential cost avoidance for social care services of between £1.092m and £2.184m per year

This potential cost avoidance figure is determined by the number of social care deflections who are no longer awaiting a Care Act assessment. This

is caveated with the assumption that the 300 referrals from social care to Social Prescribing would have received some social care package. However, if not all referrals would have qualified, there is still substantial cost avoidance for social care. The following table assesses potential cost avoidance based on percentage of 'pure' deflections being eligible of a social care package. This approach has been taken as data on Care Act eligibility of referrals was not captured. It is recommended that this data is captured as part of future social prescribing services to more accurately determine ROI to social care.

% of Social Prescribing deflections from social care that would be eligible for social care package if Care Act assessment was completed	Low End Cost Avoidance	High End Cost Avoidance
1%	£11k	£22k
5%	£55k	£110k
10%	£110k	£220k
25%	£273k	£546k

Findings and Analysis

This table acknowledges the range of cost avoidance to social care is likely to be much lower than the headline figure but there is clear opportunity to reduce demand on the Care Act assessment process, and in so doing, avoiding costs of undertaking Care Act assessments for 300 people per year, supporting people sooner through Social Prescribing services and, at least, delaying their requirement for higher need, higher cost services.

The ROI analysis focussed on social care as this was this was the most accurate and valid data available, with limitations in primary and secondary health data due to it being self-reported. Based exclusively on social care deflection data, the breakeven point for Social Prescribing would be approximately 25% of social care referrals being eligible for a care package under the Care Act but being supported through Social Prescribing as an alternative. However, this does not account for the long list of other financial benefits that can be aligned to the work of the programme:

- Inward investment into the borough from grant funding awarded to VCFSE groups who have been part of Thriving Communities and wish to grow projects beyond their current reach. Groups often quoted their application and involvement in Thriving Communities as the catalyst for growth
- Full or part time jobs created in the VCFSE sector providing local jobs for local people

- Increase in trained volunteers across Oldham VCFSE sector, improving resilience and sustainability across the sector. Social Action Fund projects have reported training of over 100 new volunteers
- Jobs and volunteer numbers contributing to overall increase in community capacity
- Skills development and workforce development of VCFSE sector to improve capability of community groups to deliver services in new and engaging ways, as well as supporting increasingly complex referrals
- Demand reduction and cost avoidance for the wider public service system in Oldham, such as housing and welfare support – service user data from across the programme shows high numbers of referrals of people needing support and achieving positive outcomes

Research from Sheffield Hallam indicates total ROI for Social Prescribing could be as much as 1:10. The ROI put together for Thriving Communities has relied predominately on social care deflections data, which already evidences a considerable ROI. Combine this with the additional financial ROI above, social ROI harnessed from the programme, including community cohesion and qualitative benefits would result in a considerably higher ROI for Thriving Communities.

Answering the Evaluation Questions

Q1: What is the impact for the people referred into Social Prescribing or funded activities?

Social Prescribing, Social Action Fund projects and Fast Grants initiatives have, undeniably, had a positive impact on the lives of people living in Oldham. There are headlines to show this.

- 201 'pure' deflections from social care by Social Prescribing since January 2021 – an average caseload of 25 per month
- 70% positive engagements of closed Social Prescribing referrals
- Improvements of between 8 and 32 percentage points on ONS4 data measuring life satisfaction, worthwhileness, happiness and anxiety

In addition to this, qualitative findings from surveys and case studies is also positive

- Case studies show how Social Prescribing has improved people's confidence and 'get my life back on track' by supporting people to overcome issues with wider determinant of health, such as housing, financial advice and employment
- Social Action Fund projects have targeted communities with innovative projects, giving people the opportunity to learn new skills and meet new people
- Fast Grants have connected people with short term initiatives in their community and reducing social isolation

- Fast Grants have also targeted under-represented groups, such as encouraging young girls into STEM learning

The programme, has, of course, had challenges to overcome and still face:

- Social Prescribing and funded activities are having to find the balance between connecting with people online as they have for the last 18 months and encouraging people to meet in groups to maintain participant's confidence
- Computer literacy issues meant some people struggled to engage with online activities
- Despite encourage engaging numbers, there are still over 200 referrals into Social Prescribing that were ended with the service user disengaged
- The impact on the wider health landscape (GP appointments, A&E visits, hospital bed days) is still not proven

Although these challenges remain, quantitative and qualitative data presented in this evaluation evidence that the programme has, on the whole, had a positive impact on people's lives.

Answering the Evaluation Questions

Q2: What is the impact on the public service system?

Evidence presented in the evaluation falls short of showing a sustained or substantial impact on the public service system. As one strategic stakeholder put it *'even if there is to be a positive impact, this is likely to take a few years to filter through the system'*. Return-on-investment for the programme is positive.

Quantitative findings are mixed:

- 201 'pure' deflections from social care by Social Prescribing since January 2021 – an average caseload of 25 per month
- An overall increase in GP appointments 3-months post engagement but a reduction from the majority of people who had more than one appointment in the 3-months prior to engagement
- An overall increase in A&E visits 3-months post engagement but a reduction from everyone who had more than one visit 3-months prior to engagement
- A small reduction in the number of non-elected hospital bed days

Qualitative findings also suggest the programme has not had a fundamental impact, but instead has begun to change the narrative across the wider public service system.

- Stakeholders suggested a disjoint between social care and community

work remains, although Thriving Communities had laid a cornerstone for this

- There is limited oversight of prevention services across Oldham. There is no single approach to prevention, which leads to complexity in commissioning, referrals, and access to prevention services
- Pathways between services are improving, and Thriving Communities has played an important role in that, but they often remain unclear

At an operational level, there have clearly been benefits but strategically, the impact has fallen short of its target across the system. Complex change of this level requires time. This is not only a transformational change in service delivery but a cultural one across organisations encouraging a new way of working, new way of commissioning and as one stakeholder put it, a new 'philosophy'.

Answering the Evaluation Questions

Q3: What is the impact on local VCFSE sector?

Oldham was fortunate to have a flourishing VCFSE sector before the programme. Thriving Communities has been influential at promoting and empowering the sector to demonstrate its qualities. There has been a paradigm shift over the course of the programme in the value the system places on the sector and integral role it plays in service delivery.

The evaluation has evidenced this by presenting qualitative findings that show:

- Increasing reputation of the sector from the programme
- Sector representation at decision making boards and leading parts of the borough's multi-agency pandemic response
- Greater trust placed in the sector to deliver high quality services
- Volunteer numbers have increased
- Organisations now have paid roles that were previously voluntary
- Community groups now have the capability to run sessions online, expanding their reach
- Training and workforce development has been undertaken to increase capability to work with complex referrals
- Improved capability to respond to bids and funding opportunities – many projects cited their experience of bidding for Thriving Communities funding as transferrable to bids and funding they have won since

- Innovation partnership has often been referred to as 'greater than the sum of its parts', paying tribute to the impact of the model
- Fast Grant recipients commented that the funding was the first time they had thought about growth

The impact of Thriving Communities (and, crucially, the role the sector has played in its delivery) on the VCFSE sector in Oldham has been fundamental to the position of the sector. This is the standout positive from the evaluation framework. The sector has been trusted and empowered through this programme and the sector, the council and service users have benefited from it.

Answering the Evaluation Questions

Q4: How effectively has the model been implemented?

Combining stakeholder perceptions of implementation with the quantitative data of project implementation gives a well-rounded view of the success of the model. There have been several standout positives through implementation:

- Huge public value creation in terms of stakeholder satisfaction, delivery of agreed objectives and use of public resources
- The innovation partnership as a tool for commissioning has been successful. This is evidenced from feedback from partnership members, support from commissioners and external recognition of its success with international awards
- Grant funding has been flexible and used to support the local context. Delivering Fast Grants in rounds of funding meant that the grants could be used to fund priorities at that time, as evidenced with the transfer of funding to the pandemic response fund
- Strong programme management and mobilisation meant the programme was built on solid foundations. This allowed delivery partners the autonomy to focus on services
- The thematic analysis shows that although there was confusion around 'defining Thriving Communities', the programme successfully supported community capacity and capability building, encouraged partnership working and increased the value of the VCFSE sector.

With these successes come lessons learned from challenges faced throughout the programme:

- Keeping track of original outputs and outcomes is important. The pandemic has a huge impact on the course of the programme, however, it is important to continually reflect on the original purpose and ensure this is delivered
- Avoid scope creep. Stakeholders made reference to the programme sometimes being 'all things to all people'
- Heavy governance, application process and reporting expectations put additional pressure on community groups
- Differing approaches to prevention across the borough has been a major challenge highlighted by stakeholders. The programme must act as a catalyst for the system to address this

The successes and lessons learned from Thriving Communities and its implementation give the opportunity to influence wider strategy – be that council driven or system wide. The effectiveness of programme implementation was the foundation to delivering the outputs and outcomes for those who benefited from the services, as well as partner organisations who delivered them.

Delivery of Outputs

Output	Delivered	Evidence
Thriving Community Index and Nebula	Yes	System is live and used by partners across Oldham
You & Your Community Survey	No	Survey has not been completed since Thriving Communities programme begun
Asset map of community organisations	Yes	Directory available on Action Together website
Health & Care professionals trained in asset-based approaches	Yes	Strength-based conversation training rolled out
Social Prescribing Network with underpinning targets	Yes	Social Prescribing Innovation Partnership supported with VCFSE projects and groups throughout the borough. Referral pathways in place with health and social care services
300+ Fast Grants delivered	No	133 Fast Grants awarded up to March 2020. Remaining funding was repurposed as part of Action Together Covid Recovery Fund, with a further 68 grants awarded
Attract external funding to deliver health & wellbeing outcomes	Partial	VCFSE groups attribute involvement in Thriving Communities to skills uplift and ability to successfully bid for other grants
Agreed strategic approach to public sector grant funding	Partial	One Oldham Fund proposal has been put forward. Decision making to take place
New approaches to commissioning with VCFSE sector developed	Yes	Social Prescribing Innovation Partnership awarded European Innovation in Politics

Delivery of Outcomes

Outcome	Delivered	Evidence
Commissioners and policy makers are using intelligence and insight to support decision making and commissioning decisions	Yes	TCI live and used by partners across the Oldham system
Residents experience asset-based and person-centred conversations with health and care professionals	Yes	Service user feedback and case study examples from Social Prescribing, Social Action Fund and Fast Grants examples.
Improved social connectedness and participation	Yes	Qualitative feedback from grant funded projects show improvements in community cohesion and connectedness. ONS4 scores show improvements across all four questions
Increased community capacity and community development	Yes – but ongoing	Capacity and capability increased; however further development only increases the service offer to participants
Increasing health and wellbeing	Yes	ONS4 scores show improvements across all four questions
Increasing capacity in VCFSE sector to support residents through community led approaches	Yes	See evaluation Q3 above
Commissioning decisions redistribute resource earlier upstream when they yield more benefits	Partial	Evidence shows this is possible – ie, social care deflections delivered by Social Prescribing. This should be used to inform future commissioning decisions

Delivery of Impacts

Impact	Delivered	Evidence
Increasing health and wellbeing	Yes	ONS4 scores show improvements across all four questions
Reduced social isolation	Partial	Qualitative feedback and case studies highlight the positive impact the programme has had on social isolation and loneliness, however, there has been increased referrals to Social Prescribing for this. It is likely that the pandemic has exacerbated this need
Improved resilience and ability to take control of health and wellbeing	Yes	ONS4 scores show improvements across all four questions. Case studies and qualitative feedback highlight examples of service users moving from crisis to self-supporting
Increasing capacity and sustainability within VCFSE sector	Yes	See evaluation Q3 above
Reduced demand on health and care services	Partial	There is mixed quantitative data showing 'pure' social care deflections but some statistics suggesting an increase in GP appointments from service users

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

1. The value of the VCFSE has been enhanced and so has public value

There has been a paradigm shift system-wide in the recognition, importance and value public services place on the VCSE sector. Trust in the sector has increased, recognising the capability to deliver services. Research undertaken in 2018-2019 showed there was a perception that community-led services did not deliver the best public value outcomes. This evaluation shows this has wholeheartedly changed. Likely facilitated by the role of the VCFSE in the pandemic response, stakeholders system wide and at all levels have demonstrated their value in the sector. From their role in strategic decision-making boards to delivery of frontline services, the VCFSE sector is an integral part of Oldham's system.

2. Social Prescribing is working in Oldham

There is national and international evidence that Social Prescribing can bring benefits to individuals and communities. Thriving Communities has given the local context needed in Oldham. From increasing social care deflections, to improved well-being scores, there is quantitative data showing the positive impact it is having. In addition, stakeholder's qualitative feedback and experiences show the impact on service users, partnership working and the VCFSE sector.

3. There is plenty of work still to do on integration

Partnerships at an operational and service delivery level have been influential in this programme. They are the catalyst for the benefits delivered to service users. Examples of projects working together, flexibility and repurposing of grant funding to adapt to the changing needs during the pandemic and external recognition and awards for the innovation partnership are all evidence of this. But there is more to be done at a strategic and system-wide level to entrench these changes. Stakeholders often mentioned the unclear nature of prevention services across the borough. This is due to the complex picture of commissioned prevention services, leading to a disjointed system. Although Thriving Communities aimed to align this, the complexity led to many suggesting was not always easy to define 'Thriving Communities'.

4. The lessons from this programme must influence wider strategy

Whether that be co-producing a system-wide approach to prevention services, introducing the successes of the commissioning model into new commissioning projects, or improving the ways in which the system engages with its service users, there is potential for Oldham to go further. The Thriving Communities Index can inform place-based commissioning to ensure services are targeted and meet specific needs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

5. Data sharing remains front and centre

Different organisations have different information about the same individual. Without data sharing, no service can provide fully person-centred support and care. Each organisation holds a piece to the puzzle of an individual's support needs. Data sharing agreements are often seen as a wicked issue, but progress is being made in Oldham. This needs to continue to benefit every organisation, and the person at the centre.

6. The role of digital delivery is not to be under-estimated in prevention services

Perhaps by accident, Social Prescribing and grant funded projects found alternatives to face-to-face sessions or group activities, forced mainly by the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown restrictions. While this wasn't the first-choice delivery method, service users responded positively and have shown a willingness for this to continue. Online delivery enabled groups to increase capacity to reach more people. However, it also raised a challenge of computer literacy with some service users unable to engage. Feedback from surveys also showed that the most common way of finding out about the group was via social media.

7. Community capacity and capability is improving

The programme has laid the foundations for growing the VCFSE sector

in Oldham. Community leaders' experiences and perceptions of the programme identify areas where their capability has improved. There are the skills, resource, and desire in communities to deliver projects that support people locally. Case studies showing service users' journey from crisis to self-supporting are tribute to this.

8. Is it sustainable?

Many projects have identified involvement in Thriving Communities as the facilitator for growth of their organisations and led them to bid and win funding from other regional and national schemes. This inward investment helps the whole Oldham system. There will, of course, be an ongoing need to pump-prime projects. The strong network of community projects plays a critical role as the 'social prescriptions' and prevention services.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the evaluation and above conclusions, a series of recommendations have been put forward.

Recommendations for Oldham System

1. Create a cross-system working group to co-design and co-produce prevention model for the borough
2. Consider a single grant funding pot to pool resources for community-led initiatives and community capacity building. This will ease funding applications for organisations and create a sustained funding stream
3. Continue to progress data sharing arrangements to enable health, care and support organisations to better provide targeted services

Recommendations for Oldham Council

4. Consider funding options and models for the future of Social Prescribing and VCFSE grants from March 2022
5. Design a refreshed set of objectives, outcomes and measures for Social Prescribing that align to the funding model chosen and monitor through contract management as service becomes business-as-usual. The objectives should also be refreshed for the borough's context post-pandemic given the impact this had on the programme
6. Undertake a Thriving Communities Index data refresh to support evidence based and targeted commissioning and decision making

Recommendations for Oldham VCFSE

7. Invest in online engagement and computer literacy of your service users. Feedback from surveys has shown this is an area service users wish to maintain but not all have the capability to access
8. Continue to undertake mid-project evaluation collecting quantitative wellbeing statistics of service users to evidence improvements

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