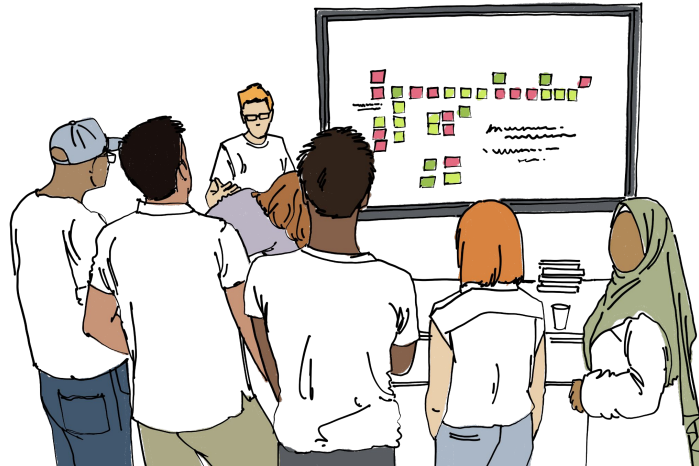# Reflections on the Volunteering Cities grant
Set-up, delivery and early stage impact

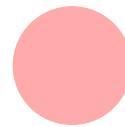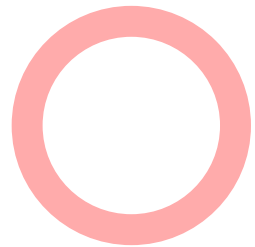Final Report by Neighbourly Lab
May 2025

Spirit of 2012 is the London 2012 legacy organisation. It was founded with a £47million endowment from the National Lottery Community Fund in 2013 and will undertake a planned closure in 2026. Their research, learning and insights from over a decade of funding projects to inspire a social legacy is available at www.spiritof2012.org.uk.

We are Neighbourly Lab, a non-profit research and evaluation organisation. Our mission is to create stronger and more connected communities, This is because increased levels of social connect in communities creates a range of downstream outcomes that contribute to thriving communities. These include: social cohesion, community resilience, reduced loneliness and improved community health and wellbeing.

Contents

1. Introduction

The Volunteering Cities Funding and Grantees

Spirit of 2012's **Volunteering Cities Fund** was awarded to four locations to **strengthen their local cultural volunteering infrastructure**. Spirit of 2012 named the Volunteering Cities grantees as 'Silver Cities'*, acknowledging the efforts, creativity and resourcefulness put into their original City of Culture bid. This funding opportunity was offered for places to **build on the momentum of this process without the City of Culture designation**.**

The grant itself was appreciated by grantees and deemed an **important contribution to effective place making.** The fact that bidders had another chance to make some difference to their local place off the back of their City of Culture bid was welcomed. This type of funding opportunity helps cities to the see value in bidding for the City of Culture, even if they know they are not likely to win. Apart from the funding they may receive, it allows them to think about **invigorating their local place and including the community in cultural activities.**

The four places that received grants were: **Bradford, Conwy, Great Yarmouth & East Suffolk and Medway**. Funding was awarded in September 2022 and ended in March 2025 (with agreement from Spirit of 2012 for projects to utilise some of their grant underspend over April - June 2025 to support the transition phase of the programmes). Whilst Bradford won the title of City of Culture 2025 after being awarded this funding, the others left the competition at earlier stages. All four places were awarded funding from Spirit of 2012 to build and strengthen their volunteering infrastructure for cultural volunteering.

*The term 'Silver Cities' funding denotes Second Place funding in relation to the UK Cities of Culture bid process ONLY. In the context of this grant it was focused on boosting cultural volunteering infrastructure.

**The call for Volunteering Cities applications and review by Spirit of 2012 took place before Bradford was awarded the City of Culture destination. Therefore they were part of this grant programme alongside developing their wider City of Culture programme.

Neighbourly Lab's role as Learning Partner

Neighbourly Lab was commissioned to facilitate the Learning Partnership among the Volunteering Cities grantees.

This included:
➢ Development of a Theory of Change
➢ Facilitating thematic workshops both face to face and online
➢ Webinars, sharing insights and useful models from other relevant work, plugging grantees into broader opportunities
➢ One to one and small group regular action/reflection meetings
➢ Engagement with volunteers
➢ Engagement with other funders
➢ 5 Learning Partnership reports (including this one) As listed to the right.

1 **What makes a successful City of Culture bid?** Report looking at key ingredients necessary for success, exploration of what we mean by success when places don't win the designation.

2 **From application to delivery: Reflections and recommendations for setting up a volunteering infrastructure.** Key benefits and challenges of the first year of being a Volunteering Cities grantee.

3 **Evaluation of the Volunteering Cities grant.** Deep dive into using second place funding to support volunteering infrastructure and opportunities to think about a different model of funding.

4 **What makes an effective volunteer infrastructure?** Feedback and recommendations from volunteers.

Purpose and scope of this report

This report brings together key learnings from the Volunteering Cities grantees' experiences over the past two and a half years. It highlights the most salient learnings and interesting themes, reminding us that much has been explored, reflected upon, resolved and evolved from the inception of the grant, until it's close.

Although this is not a traditional evaluation report, it reflects learning and insights gathered from grantee engagement and action learning workshops. It refers to the outcomes achieved that were reflected in the theory of change developed at the beginning of the programme.

The main part of the report looks at the grant in its final stage, from 'Delivery to Early Impact' by focusing on 4 key themes, emerging as essential from grantees' perspectives in shaping and sustaining a place-based volunteering infrastructure. These themes are:

- ➤ **A.** **Partnerships**
- ➤ **B.** **Accessibility**
- ➤ **C.** **Diversifying Volunteers**
- ➤ **D.** **Legacy**

We hope that emerging lessons from grantees can support other organisations and places to develop their volunteering infrastructure for cultural volunteering.

We would love this report to be useful to all sorts of stakeholders working to increase the efficacy of place-based volunteering infrastructure, as well as the importance of and opportunities in cultural sector volunteering. They include but are not limited to: Spirit of 2012, partners and other grantees, DCMS, funders of cultural events, Local Councils, place-based infrastructure organisations, volunteering organisations cultural organisations and bodies.

About the Volunteering Cities Grantees

Programme	Original aims of their programme
Amdani Conwy!	- More deaf & disabled people contribute to decision making & take leadership volunteer roles in the cultural sector. - People's personal wellbeing increases through quality volunteering experiences. - There is a stronger infrastructure for event volunteering in rural areas. - People have a greater sense of belonging. - People increase their skills & knowledge through volunteering.
Bradford Cultural Volunteering Programme	- Increased confidence, fulfilment, connection, new skills and pride in place for volunteers. - Through new and innovative approaches to making volunteering more accessible, volunteers will better reflect the district demographic. - Cultural volunteering infrastructure and partnership will be strengthened with better coordination and clear pathways. - Learning from the project including ways of increasing access to volunteering, and the development of a robust, sustained volunteering culture in Bradford, using the opportunity presented by Bradford's CIty of Culture 2025 runway period and programme. 1,780 volunteers will support the City of Culture runway programme through volunteering at events and community arts projects, augmenting our existing volunteer numbers, and providing a highly skilled 'workforce' for 2025 of 3,700 volunteers.
Cultural Connections - Great Yarmouth and East Suffolk	- Increase wellbeing. - Increase social connectedness. - Improve people's' experience of volunteering. - Empower young people to improve their community. - Improve perceptions of disabled people.
Medway Change Makers	- People's wellbeing and life satisfaction increases through volunteering as part of community cultural events. - Civic and community pride increases through volunteering and encountering volunteers as part of community cultural events. - Transactional 'micro' volunteering at cultural events enables a greater diversity of one-off and repeat volunteers who would otherwise face barriers to participating as equals. - Volunteering at community cultural events leads to increased arts and cultural engagement. - The learning outcomes foster a more nuanced understanding of events as a means to achieve the above understanding, leading to events producers/managers placing increased value on volunteers at cultural events.

Grantees aims for the Volunteering Cities grant

The table on the previous page shows the aims each of the grantees wanted to achieve with their Volunteering Cities funding.

There were **several things from their original City of Culture bids that they would have liked to pursue with additional funding**. This grant design was based on the assumption that there was a level of volunteering infrastructure already in place and existing volunteers upon which to build something more robust. In reality, the **level of cultural volunteering infrastructure in each of the cities was lower than expected when the grants were awarded, with some places having little to no foundation.** All grantees expressed commitment to **boosting their places volunteering infrastructure and appreciated the opportunity of this grant to help support this,** even if this had not been their priority in their initial bid writing for the City of Culture.

It is worth noting that owing to most locations lack of a foundation for volunteering infrastructure, there was **no shared understanding at place-level of what constituted a volunteering infrastructure.** As a result, some cities' efforts focused on creating volunteer experiences first, with the infrastructure being established alongside or later. This is in part due to the partnership challenges through low engagement from the cultural sector at first, not offering up volunteering roles as well as not feeling clear about how to get started.

Staff responsible for the programme delivery, felt that applications for the Volunteering Cities grant were written (by others) with **big and broad ambitions, which made their successful applications feel difficult to execute and deliver against outcomes**. This was compounded by the fact that as three of the four grantees **left the City of Culture competition early, they were less set up locally to deliver with less in place** and had a lot of work to do to establish their cultural volunteering infrastructure.

Spirit of 2012's approach to the Volunteering Cities Fund

Spirit of 2012 are to be commended for their approach to creating a grant fund from an existing opportunity and trialling this as a new concept. The following benefits have been highlighted:

Generous, innovative funding	Flexibility	Learning approach
The **generosity of the funding** from Spirit of 2012 for this programme has been welcomed by grantees. This was seen as a fantastic opportunity, that had not been announced when they started their City of Culture bids. It was recognised by funders that Spirit of 2012 was trialling an **interesting, innovative concept** of funding to support the City of Culture bidders, by **building on the traction of an existing programme.**	The level of flexibility the grant has offered all four grantees has been **beneficial and necessary.** Grantees faced early challenges and have shared that the **flexibility in approach,** "*it's ok to iterate and learn as we go*" supported them to **shape their programme as they went along.**	The Volunteering Cities fund had an explicit *'intention to learn'* upfront, giving permission to share ideas and challenges among grantees, each supporting the other. In addition, a **Learning Partner** was commissioned to support the grantees throughout the fund journey. Spirit of 2012 have been **open to learning about the fund** by reports to be shared with others as a funders as a learning tool.
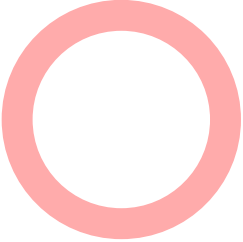
2. What we have learnt by focusing on Volunteering Infrastructure

What we mean by Volunteering Infrastructure

As mentioned previously, among the grantees of this fund, there was **no common definition or understanding at place-level of what was meant by volunteering infrastructure. This meant that some cities created volunteer experiences first, with infrastructure established either alongside or later.**

Volunteering Infrastructure refers to everything that helps make volunteering happen. It refers to the systems, partnerships, policies, and resources that support, coordinate, and enhance volunteering activities within a community. It helps to make volunteering effective, accessible, and sustainable. It would include:

- Partnerships with communities to foster effective and inclusive volunteering.
- Partnership with organisations providing volunteering opportunities.
- Tools, equipment and technology/platform to recruit, match and train volunteers with skills they need.
- Recruitment of volunteer coordinators/managers to support volunteers effectively.
- Systems for tracking what volunteers do and the impact of their work.
- Incentives, reimbursement and recognition - accreditation, awards to celebrate efforts.
- Potential pathways and additional opportunities for people volunteering.

A good volunteer infrastructure is **sustainable, inclusive and allows volunteers to reach their full potential.** For this to happen, volunteers need **clear management and importantly places need to plan for how to support the volunteering networks to be sustained beyond the lifespan of any funding**.

This grant encouraged a **focus on inclusivity** as an essential ingredient for an effective volunteer infrastructure, to ensure that the funding bolstered cultural development in place.

Insights on the level of existing Volunteering Infrastructure

It is important to acknowledge that there were **high quality applications for the Volunteering Cities funding**. In each there was some reflection about the status of each place's volunteering infrastructure, both its strengths and weaknesses. Also included was a **demonstrable commitment to improving volunteering infrastructure in their place.**

Three of the four grantees left the competition in the early stages of the City of Culture bidding process. **This meant there were less developed plans, partnerships and infrastructure in place to support their cultural growth. Without an existing cultural programme in place, there was little momentum for cultural volunteering to build on, making this a challenge from the outset for these grantees.** Also to note, volunteering infrastructure was not necessarily a focus in their City of Culture bids, meaning that they may have only thought about their ability to deliver on volunteering infrastructure in order to help secure this funding. This made early delivery more challenging as there was more to do from the outset.

We also learnt that there was some risk that the grantee organisations who were funded to develop local cultural volunteering infrastructure found themselves reporting on pre-defined indicators of success that **did not fully reflect the actual purpose of volunteering infrastructure,** adding to challenges in early set up. **The monitoring and evaluation processes needed to reflect measures on building an effective and sustainable volunteering infrastructure**, particularly within cultural contexts. In this programme, despite knowing what constitutes a good volunteering infrastructure, we saw examples of grantees focusing heavily on collecting data on the volunteer experience (e.g. satisfaction and improved well-being) and short term outputs such as numbers of volunteers at events, without looking at the measurement of volunteering infrastructure itself. This led to some confusion in delivery priorities for grantees and less measurement insight of the overall volunteering infrastructure of each place.

The table on the next page shows **different elements of volunteering infrastructure that the volunteers and grantees developed**. As we can see, there is much focus on good volunteering practice. The infrastructure sits around it.

Different elements of Volunteering Infrastructure and good volunteering practice as experienced by volunteers across the grant

Before the event /activity

Infrastructure
- Partners offering opportunities locally
- Finding out about the volunteering opportunities
- Signing up processes
- Form filling
- Receiving information about the specific things that they are to be doing
- Training and skills development
- Knowing about systems, policies and procedures
- Key people to support and manage volunteers
- Time expectations and commitment
- Inclusivity and accessibility demonstrated in comms
- Policies and procedures developed

Good Practice
- Meeting and mixing with other volunteers

During the event/activity

Infrastructure
- Policies and procedures shared
- Coordination among volunteers on the day
- Support with what they needed from management/other organisations
- Uniform/ID/Badges
- Information about the role - what they need to, who with, where they need to be, who is managing them etc.

Good Practice
- Checking in on whether the role what they expected to be doing - was the training right
- Breaks
- Inclusive and accessible for all volunteers

After the event/activity

Infrastructure
- Reimbursement of expenses
- Information about further opportunities to volunteer
- Further training and development opportunities in place

Good Practice
- Appropriate wrap up
- Chance to give feedback
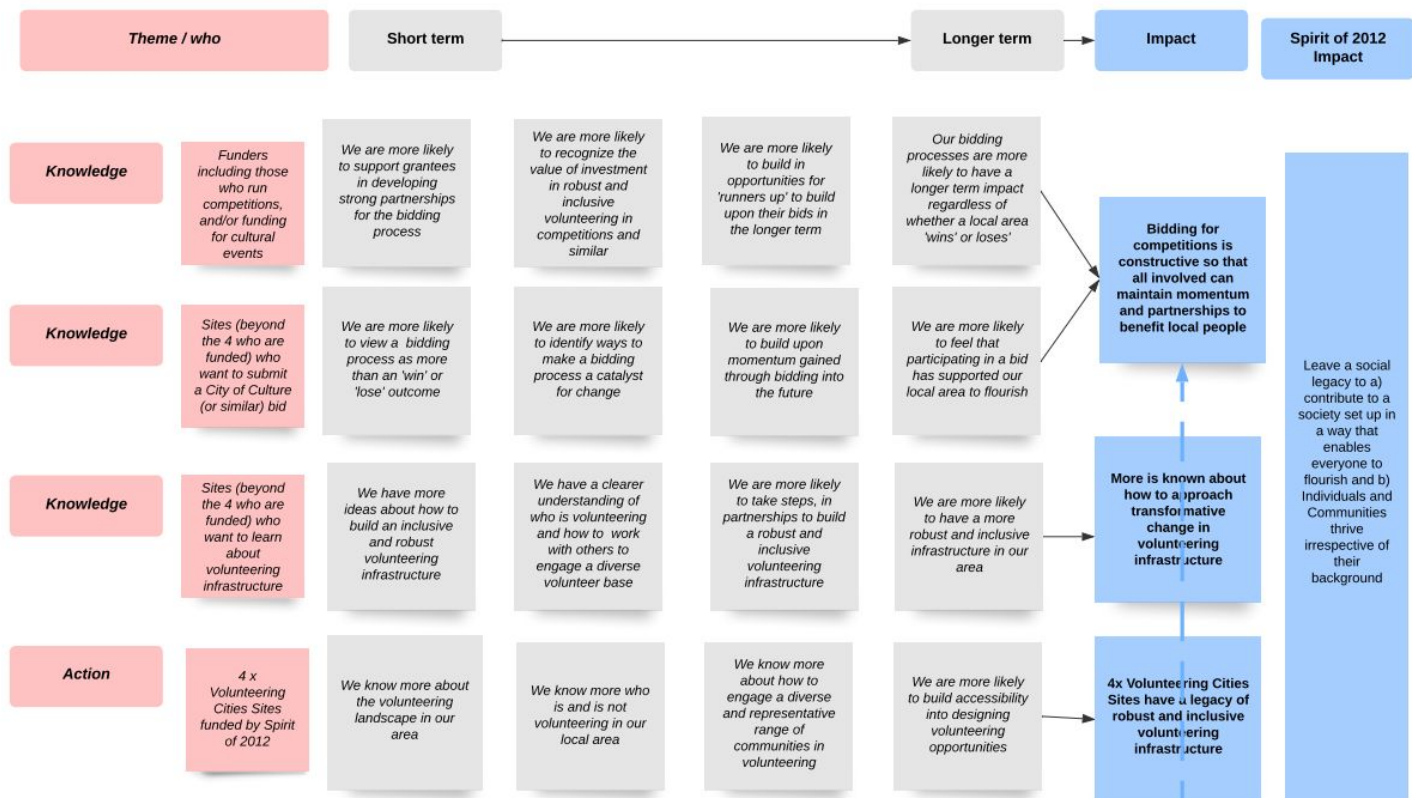- Chance to mix with other volunteers

3. The Theory of Change

Volunteering Cities Theory of Change

This theory of change was co-designed with grantees at the start of the programme.

Theme / who		Short term				Longer term	Impact	Spirit of 2012 Impact
Knowledge	Funders including those who run competitions, and/or funding for cultural events	We are more likely to support grantees in developing strong partnerships for the bidding process	We are more likely to recognize the value of investment in robust and inclusive volunteering in competitions and similar	We are more likely to build in opportunities for 'runners up' to build upon their bids in the longer term	Our bidding processes are more likely to have a longer term impact regardless of whether a local area 'wins' or loses'		**Bidding for competitions is constructive so that all involved can maintain momentum and partnerships to benefit local people**	
Knowledge	Sites (beyond the 4 who are funded) who want to submit a City of Culture (or similar) bid	We are more likely to view a bidding process as more than an 'win' or 'lose' outcome	We are more likely to identify ways to make a bidding process a catalyst for change	We are more likely to build upon momentum gained through bidding into the future	We are more likely to feel that participating in a bid has supported our local area to flourish			Leave a social legacy to a) contribute to a society set up in a way that enables everyone to flourish and b) Individuals and Communities thrive irrespective of their background
Knowledge	Sites (beyond the 4 who are funded) who want to learn about volunteering infrastructure	We have more ideas about how to build an inclusive and robust volunteering infrastructure	We have a clearer understanding of who is volunteering and how to work with others to engage a diverse volunteer base	We are more likely to take steps, in partnerships to build a robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure	We are more likely to have a more robust and inclusive infrastructure in our area		**More is known about how to approach transformative change in volunteering infrastructure**	
Action	4 x Volunteering Cities Sites funded by Spirit of 2012	We know more about the volunteering landscape in our area	We know more who is and is not volunteering in our local area	We know more about how to engage a diverse and representative range of communities in volunteering	We are more likely to build accessibility into designing volunteering opportunities		**4x Volunteering Cities Sites have a legacy of robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure**	

Please note: each grantee site also had their own Theory of Change developed and independent evaluators

Reflecting on the Theory of Change

The theory of change reminds us of the **4 key audiences that could benefit directly and indirectly from the learning outcomes** of this grant, they are:

1. **Funders**, including those who run competitions and/or funding for cultural events
2. The four **Volunteering Cities grantees**
3. **Sites** beyond the four grantees who want to **submit a City of Culture** (or similar bid)
4. **Sites** beyond the four grantees who want to **learn about volunteering infrastructure**

When we look at the **short term outcomes** we can see that **grantees' have developed their knowledge and understanding of the local landscape in the their area**, and **understand how to build an inclusive and robust volunteering infrastructure.** We know that starting this from nascent was more challenging than anticipated, particularly as there was much to learn in terms of outreach and partnership building, increasing reach and diversity of their volunteers and building in accessibility. There is much to celebrate here, considering the challenges grantees have overcome since the start of their grants. The lessons learnt from the first year and a half, and therefore the shorter term outcomes are summarised on the next pages, **'Application to Set-up'** and '**Set up to Delivery.**'

The lessons captured in the final year of the grant, focussing on **'Delivery to Early Impact and Sustainability'** will be discussed in the following section. All four sites are on track to have inclusive volunteering infrastructure, and are meeting their **longer term outcomes** such as building accessibility into designing volunteering opportunities. They **know more about who is volunteering** and **how to work with others in partnership**, **to build an inclusive volunteering infrastructure**. Their volunteering infrastructure is not yet robust, but with further efforts, partnerships and cultural volunteering opportunities, there is potential for this to happen. Most grantees have taken steps towards sustainability, and robustness. It seems that Bradford, which has benefited from additional funding, events and activities, is more likely to have a robust volunteering infrastructure in place in the future, as they have a longer time to continue to develop their infrastructure and focus on its legacy post their City of Culture year.
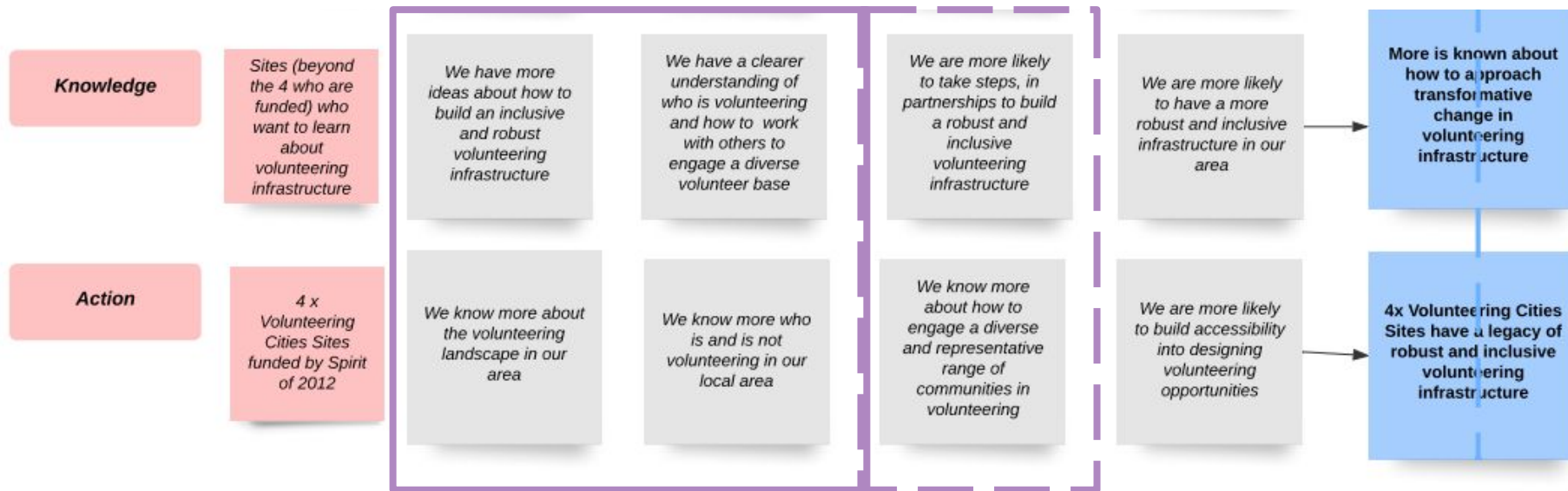
4. Overview of key learnings to date

Application to Set-up

Application to set-up sits here on the theory of change. We can see that grantees achieved early outputs. It is important to mention that the knowledge process was iterative and continued throughout the grant.

Knowledge

Sites (beyond the 4 who are funded) who want to learn about volunteering infrastructure

We have more ideas about how to build an inclusive and robust volunteering infrastructure

We have a clearer understanding of who is volunteering and how to work with others to engage a diverse volunteer base

We are more likely to take steps, in partnerships to build a robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure

We are more likely to have a more robust and inclusive infrastructure in our area

More is known about how to approach transformative change in volunteering infrastructure

Action

4 x Volunteering Cities Sites funded by Spirit of 2012

We know more about the volunteering landscape in our area

We know more who is and is not volunteering in our local area

We know more about how to engage a diverse and representative range of communities in volunteering

We are more likely to build accessibility into designing volunteering opportunities

4x Volunteering Cities Sites have a legacy of robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure

Application to Set-up: Key Learnings

The first phase of the grant, from application writing to project set-up was initially challenging for all grantees in different ways. The factors that contributed to this included: their local context, existing internal resources, partnerships with cultural organisations, and their ready-state to 'get going' and build on the volunteering infrastructure that was already in place.

In this phase of the grant we learnt **what makes a successful City of Culture bid, so that grantees could build on the from their bids and the learning of others to support in developing their volunteering infrastructure locally.** We then **focused on eliciting key learnings for the early set-up phase,** combining findings from a synthesis **derived from desk research, baseline grantee interviews** and a **learning day workshop. These sessions invited grantees' reflections on their early grant set up experiences and exploration of successes and challenges.**

The relationship between the ideal process as written in the Volunteering Cities application, the actual situation once award is given and the challenges faced with early delivery on the ground have offered us much to learn and share. **The early insights around difficulties with developing partnerships and building trust among some of the cultural sector, pioneering an inclusive and accessible volunteering infrastructure and tensions between building on what was already there and starting from scratch to support sustainable volunteering, are reflected throughout the whole grant cycle**, as we will see throughout this report.
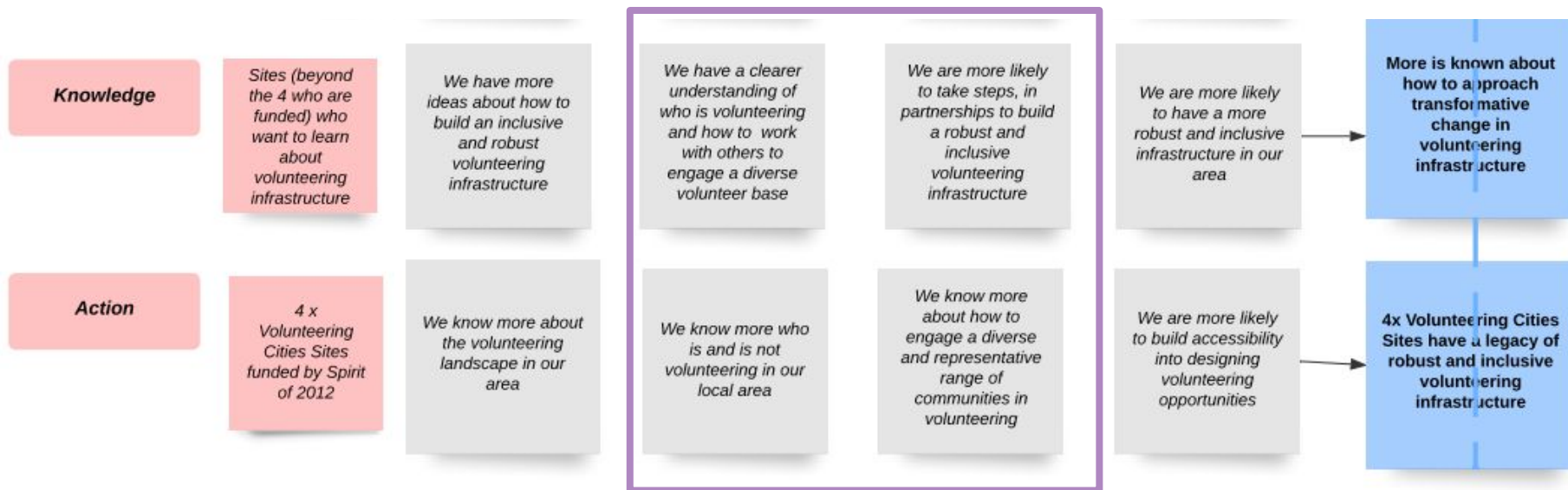
Application to Set-up: Key Learnings

We identified that a **successful City of Culture bid application** required many components to take it to award stage, and that a bid can be successful by benefiting its City, even if it doesn't get the designation. This includes the establishment of **sustainable strategic partnerships, situating the bid in longer term cultural planning investments and creating an inclusive and accessible event schedule.** Without these in place already, the implementation and delivery of the volunteering infrastructure is much more challenging, especially if starting from scratch with little to no infrastructure in place. Ideally, **partnerships need to have been in place** for a long time to help realise the application ambitions effectively and not disband once the application has been written.

We learnt that coming together for purposes of winning the City of Culture bid and then this Volunteering Cities grant is not as effective or sustainable. In the case of this grant, **a wider range of people needed to participate in the application processes**, both before and after it, so that implementation can begin and funding for this work can have most impact. In the case of these grantees, **partnerships with cultural sector organisations and councils were new if in place and less stable than grantees would have liked.**

We also identified that the **conditions to support a good volunteering infrastructure** include: a **good managerial structure, resources for sustaining the volunteer network,** and **an emphasis on diversity and inclusion**. We learnt that all three of these are necessary both for a bid to use volunteers in the best possible way to **achieve their planned schedule**, and for the **bidding process to lead to sustained development,** regardless of the City of Culture competition outcome. We highlighted that sustaining and investing in diversity and inclusion particularly requires dedicated staff members and regular time and attention paid to volunteer groups, planning for how the groups sustain after the funding ends.

Set-up to Delivery

Set-up to delivery sits here on the theory of change. Grantees were reaching these goals, whilst facing a range of challenges on the ground.

Knowledge

Sites (beyond the 4 who are funded) who want to learn about volunteering infrastructure

We have more ideas about how to build an inclusive and robust volunteering infrastructure

We have a clearer understanding of who is volunteering and how to work with others to engage a diverse volunteer base

We are more likely to take steps, in partnerships to build a robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure

We are more likely to have a more robust and inclusive infrastructure in our area

More is known about how to approach transformative change in volunteering infrastructure

Action

4 x Volunteering Cities Sites funded by Spirit of 2012

We know more about the volunteering landscape in our area

We know more who is and is not volunteering in our local area

We know more about how to engage a diverse and representative range of communities in volunteering

We are more likely to build accessibility into designing volunteering opportunities

4x Volunteering Cities Sites have a legacy of robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure

Set-up to Delivery: Key Learnings

The next phase of the grant, where grantees were setting up and trying to deliver against their aims and objectives, surfaced a range of challenges and broader learning opportunities. Most of these challenges were experienced collectively by the grantees, which had implications for developing their place-based volunteering infrastructure and adherence to the original Volunteering Cities grant application. These challenges, in part, reflect the **conditions necessary for successful delivery** highlighted overleaf around **partnerships, inclusivity and accessibility**, as well as some broader, practical place-based challenges linked to what was needed locally to support place and **whether or not volunteering Infrastructure was a priority for everyone.**

Project teams found it **difficult to achieve the outcomes the grant writers set out in their applications** to Spirit of 2012. Some described them as unrealistic as their **local volunteering infrastructure was more underdeveloped than reflected in the Volunteering Cities applications,** so they had more to than initially described. Their tasks included: hiring staff to deliver against the grant, building internal partnerships, outreach with residents, developing partnerships for finding volunteer opportunities in the cultural sector, setting up volunteer platforms and comms, getting volunteers to sign up, having events and activities for volunteers to opt into. There was also training and development of volunteers where necessary, policy development and ensuring partners were working with the same set of standards and accessibility criteria.

These early challenges indicate there may have been some nascent volunteering infrastructure in place, rather than something to easily and efficiently build upon. Delivery staff quickly learnt that **partnerships were less established than first thought,** making much of their early set-up more time intensive.

Set-up to Delivery: Key Learnings

Furthermore, the levels of community engagement was lower than initially described in the bid. In some places we heard that there was **little knowledge or engagement from the wider communities about the original City of Culture bid.** This meant there was less momentum upon which to build, making the initial grant stages harder to execute and get necessary 'buy-in'. A lot of outreach and engagement was needed to raise awareness and encourage participation in future local cultural volunteering opportunities.

Among the grantees, there was **not a common language describing what volunteering infrastructure was**, which was further complicated by the application writing teams ambitions for the grant, particularly around what could be achieved in terms of volunteer numbers, without the secure partnerships and developed infrastructure in place. Plus, the lack of clear handover in key elements of the programme and how it should be delivered, meant that once staff were recruited and in post, they found it hard to get started and stick to timelines, adding to delays in what they were hoping to achieve locally.

With this context in mind, it was unclear for grantees how to measure volunteering infrastructure, in this set-up to delivery phase. They were more more focused on monitoring outputs and evaluating the effectiveness and quality of what was on the ground, such as the recruitment strategies or management systems, training and support. This is discussed on the following pages.

The Monitoring and Evaluation Process

The early set-up challenges meant that **grantees tended to focus on outputs such as volunteer numbers and volunteer experience, finding it harder to hold in mind the bigger ambitions of the grant**. They were not necessarily thinking about the outcomes and how to pivot to achieve them and stay within the original bid ambitions, nor were they clear on how to measure the volunteering infrastructure. Importantly, through conversations with grant managers, grantees received more support from Spirit of 2012, and more flexibility was baked into their delivery plans, making them realistic and more achievable, however measuring volunteering infrastructure was not always clear. **it is important to ensure that Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) processes are fit-for-purpose to reflect the realities of building effective and sustainable volunteering infrastructure, particularly within cultural contexts.**

Rather than focus on volunteer numbers, experiences or personal benefits of volunteering, more insightful indicators of volunteering infrastructure could include:

- **Capacity and resilience of volunteer-involving organisations**
- **Systems and networks for volunteer coordination**
- **Pathways for volunteering engagement**
- **Long term sustainability beyond the funding period**

The table on the next page considers future volunteering infrastructure outcomes and ways they could be measured or considerations of future funding programmes.

Volunteering infrastructure outcomes	Indicator suggestions
Increased knowledge and awareness of what constitutes strong volunteering infrastructure	• No. of organisations trained or supported in volunteer management practice. • % of stakeholders who report increased understanding of volunteering infrastructure principles.
Stronger partnerships between key stakeholders in volunteering infrastructure	• No. and frequency of strategic meetings between key stakeholders (e.g. councils, cultural organisations, community groups). • % of organisations reporting improved collaboration on volunteer-related initiatives. • No. of formalised partnership agreements created.
Cultural organisations are better equipped to manage and support volunteers	• % of cultural organisations with a volunteer coordinator or equivalent role. • % of organisations implementing volunteer policies. • Number of volunteers needed by cultural organisations. • Number of new, sustained volunteer opportunities created within cultural organisation.
Improved accessibility in volunteering opportunities	• % of organisations reporting increased awareness of gaps in accessibility and taking steps to address them. • % of organisations with policies ensuring physical, digital and linguistic accessibility in volunteer recruitment and engagement. • No. of training sessions or resources available to volunteer managers on accessibility best practice. • % of organisations implementing inclusive recruitment and engagement practices. • No. of new volunteering opportunities designed with accessibility in mind. • % of volunteers reporting that opportunities are accessible and inclusive.
Increased sustainability of volunteering infrastructure	• Increased availability of long-term funding and policy commitments to volunteering infrastructure. • % of organisations maintaining volunteer management systems post-finding.

The Volunteers' Perspectives

As part of this learning, **it was important to understand how the volunteering infrastructure developed and supported place-based volunteering from volunteers' perspectives.** These insights helped us to develop a set of recommendations from volunteers to support organisations setting place-based, cultural volunteering infrastructure in the future.

Despite a small sample of 12 volunteers interviewed, we identified four types of volunteers (of which you could fit into more than one):
1. **Experienced volunteers** - have worked or volunteered in the past so had some expectations.
2. **Those new to volunteering** - attracted to the idea of cultural volunteering.
3. **Those new to a place** - using volunteering as an opportunity to mix and meet with others.
4. **Those with additional support needs** - the focus on inclusivity and accessibility diversified people able to volunteer.

There were different types of volunteering opportunities including:
➢ **One off events** - including larger festivals and smaller events.
➢ **Regular cultural or community activities** - Where opportunities in the cultural sector led to more regular volunteer opportunities with the same organisation.
➢ **Volunteer-led opportunities**- where volunteers had a say in the design and development of place-based activities.

Volunteers recommended that it was important to:
➢ Consider the **full volunteer journey** - motivation, awareness, sign up, training, experience, follow up and feedback. It was important that necessary policies and support was in place, to enable are more diverse volunteer base.
➢ Consider the **different types of volunteers to make it inclusive, and that motivations to volunteer vary.**
➢ **The initial welcome and early experiences** mean a lot to volunteers ongoing commitment and sense of belonging.
➢ Other volunteers can **support and learn** from one another.
➢ The importance of **volunteer voice** in feedback and recommendations, and telling them what has changed as a result.
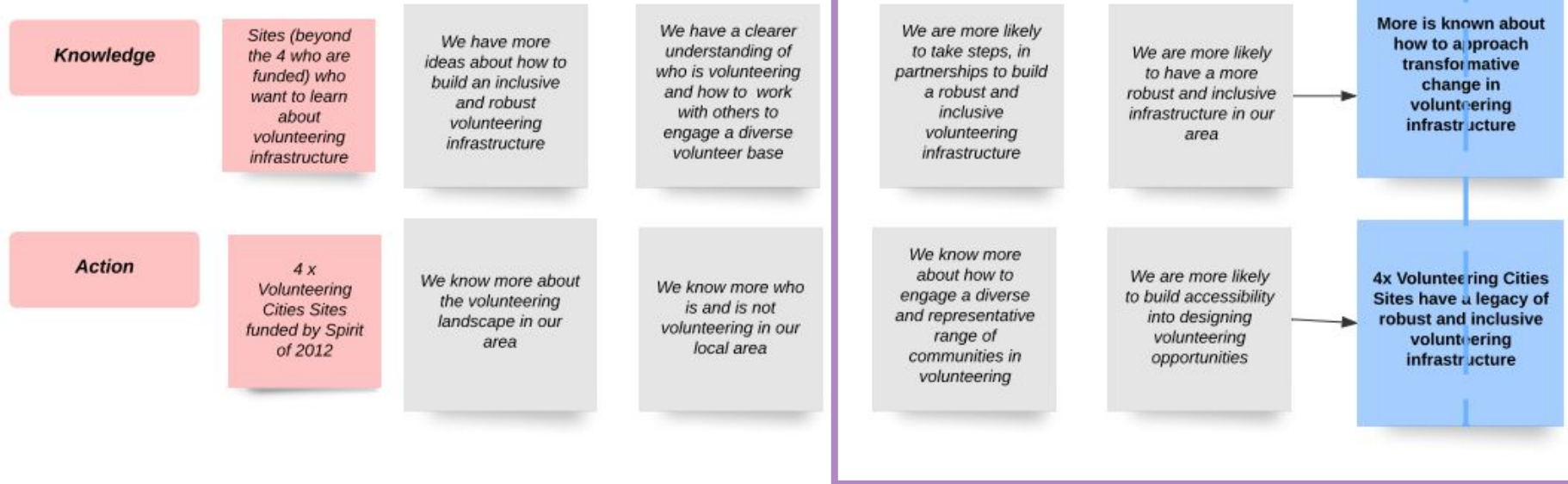
5. Key insights and recommendations from Delivery to Early Stage Impact and Sustainability

Theory of Change: Delivery to Early Impact

Delivery to early stage impact sits here on the theory of change.

Knowledge

Sites (beyond the 4 who are funded) who want to learn about volunteering infrastructure

We have more ideas about how to build an inclusive and robust volunteering infrastructure

We have a clearer understanding of who is volunteering and how to work with others to engage a diverse volunteer base

We are more likely to take steps, in partnerships to build a robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure

We are more likely to have a more robust and inclusive infrastructure in our area

More is known about how to approach transformative change in volunteering infrastructure

Action

4 x Volunteering Cities Sites funded by Spirit of 2012

We know more about the volunteering landscape in our area

We know more who is and is not volunteering in our local area

We know more about how to engage a diverse and representative range of communities in volunteering

We are more likely to build accessibility into designing volunteering opportunities

4x Volunteering Cities Sites have a legacy of robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure

Delivery to Early Impact: Themes

The remainder of this report focused on the 'delivery to early stage impact' stage of the Volunteering Cities programme.

The impact goals of the theory of change were that '**More is known about how to approach transformative change in volunteering infrastructure'** and that '**The 4 volunteer cities sites have a legacy of robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure.'** The steps towards this impact included the following changes:

➢ **'We are more likely to take steps in partnerships to build a robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure'.**
➢ **'We know more about how to engage a diverse and representative range of communities in volunteering'.**
➢ **'We are more likely to have a more robust and inclusive infrastructure in our area.'**
➢ **'We are more likely to build accessibility into designing volunteering opportunities'.**

We will explore how much these goals have been achieved using the following themes:
A. **Partnerships**
B. **Accessibility**
C. **Diversifying Volunteers**
D. **Legacy**

A. Partnerships

Spirit of 2012 asks of the grant
A specific goal of the Volunteering Cities grant was for locations to develop and enhance their partnership working building from their City of Culture bid. This is highlighted in the programme aims:

- To understand how the **momentum of the bid process** can be a **platform to designing sustainable volunteer programmes**,and a **catalyst for social connectedness** and **partnership working.**

Theory of Change goals
The goal of the grantees having a better idea of the volunteering landscape was identified early on in the theory of change that reflects the need and understanding of developing and supporting partnerships across the council as well as the voluntary and cultural sector. This responds to the long term goal of:

- **'We are more likely to take steps in partnerships to build a robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure.'**

Partnership approach
Each location started with different up-front partnerships in their applications, some including cultural organisations, voluntary organisations and disability focused organisations in the outset.

Throughout the duration of the grant some partnerships were significantly affected by Council challenges with funding which led to different delivery partners than planned. The table on the next page summarises their approach to partnership and approach to working with cultural organisations.

Grantees Partnership Approach

Programme	Partnerships	With Cultural Organisations
Amdani! Conwy	The approach had Conwy County Borough Council leading the program in partnership with Disability Arts Cymru, and Community and Voluntary Support Conwy. However, the council were less involved in actual delivery.	The partnership built on existing relationships and built new ones with cultural organisations focusing on offering accessible volunteering opportunities.
Bradford Cultural Volunteering Programme	The project was due to be managed by City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council in collaboration with Community Action Bradford & District and Bradford Culture Company (later known as 'Bradford 2025') During the delivery the council team changed and the grant was novated, so that 'Bradford 2025' could manage it.	The programme was part of the wider build up to the City of Culture year for Bradford in 2025 where cultural partnerships were the key partnerships being built for their designation.
Great Yarmouth & East Suffolk Cultural Connections	Delivered in partnership between Great Yarmouth Borough Council, East Suffolk Council, Community Action Suffolk and Voluntary Norfolk. The delivery focused on each place separately in partnership with their council and voluntary organisations.	The programme built on existing cultural heritage opportunities and developing new opportunities for volunteers with a range of cultural organisations.
Medway Change Makers	Delivery was due to be led by Ideas Test in partnership with Medway Voluntary Action, Medway Place Board, Creative Medway & Medway Council. However, the team within the council disbanded during the programme so Ideas Test, who are a cultural organisation themselves, led a lot of the delivery.	Developing wider cultural partnerships for the programme took time and Ideas Test were able to learn about expectations and challenges in working with cultural organisations through a roundtable event.

Partnerships: Councils

Council Involvement

It is important to note that the timing of the Volunteering Cities programme dovetailed with impact of COVID-19 and the and the Cost of Living Crisis on Local Council's priorities and resources, therefore affecting their ability to stay involved in the programme. Each city had a lead council involved in the application stage but when it came to delivery some of these partnerships necessarily shifted.

Bradford, Medway and Conwy all had to amend their original partnership approach due to wider financial situations their councils experienced after being awarded the grant. For example, Ideas Test lead the Medway programme with less input from the council than envisaged. Their position in the arts space, directly working with communities gave them credibility for effective cultural engagement, but their programme had to pivot from the original plans.

This experience showed that the Voluntary or Cultural sector organisations are able to lead delivery in a place where the council involvement may not be possible, and is worth considering for future grant designs.

Council Partnerships

Great Yarmouth and East Suffolks' Volunteering Cities grant continued the partnership developed for their City of Culture bid. This provided much learning on cross-county collaboration as well as insights on setting up and establishing volunteering infrastructure to suit two, quite different locations. The following case study looks at how this worked.

Partnerships: Council Case Study

Great Yarmouth and East Suffolk

The partnership for this Volunteering Cities grant was between Great Yarmouth Borough Council and East Suffolk Council, alongside their voluntary partners in each area: Community Action Suffolk and Voluntary Norfolk. The partnership between these two councils came from the original City of Culture bid, and was maintained for the Volunteering Cities application.

Insights

- The areas are very different. Great Yarmouth has a coastline of around 50 miles supported by the Borough Council and East Suffolk is a huge rural area with hubs of activity in local places but local transport as a barrier.
- Each location focused independently on what volunteering infrastructure already existed and was needed. This meant that they executed delivery based on place-based needs rather than creating something new across council boundaries. This approach enabled both places to apply an asset-based approach to cultural volunteering.
- The two Councils maintained regular communication, to share learning and challenges, particularly on engaging with volunteers and cultural organisations. They chose one organisation to take the lead in engaging with Spirit of 2012.
- The relationships between the council, voluntary and cultural organisations improved in each area as they became more collaborative as part of this programme.
- Both places utilised existing volunteering platforms, which led to some challenges in monitoring and evaluation, particularly around what data could be captured, shared and collated across the programme as a whole.

Lessons

- This example highlights the importance of 'place' in creating and sustaining volunteering infrastructure.
- The size of some City of Culture bids covers a large geographical area which may not translate well to another grant with the same partnership in place, e.g. running a unified volunteer infrastructure programme. By running these as two separate projects, utilising existing platforms and volunteer sector partnerships, allowed it to grow and stay relevant.

Partnerships: Voluntary and Community Organisations

Voluntary and Community Organisations

It's important to recognise the wider context in which this Volunteering Cities programme sat, a time when organisations across the community sector with established volunteer programmes, were seeing a decline in their volunteer numbers post COVID-19. Instead of seeing this as an issue to work with other organisations facing similar challenges, by sharing infrastructure, having a more centralised approach and filling any gaps, they preferred to deal with their situations and needs separately, despite how challenging it may have been.

> *"The experience here has been that as the project got underway there was still a pandemic legacy concern about volunteer recruitment and retention. "* Programme Lead

This meant that grantees struggled to engage with some of the the larger voluntary organisations, who perhaps had their own volunteering infrastructure and group of volunteers already in place and were trying to build them back up. In some places the grantees were seen as cuddly competition, rather than a source of support or collaboration. This meant that building on what was already there was made challenging, as organisations were thinking about their needs, rather than of the place as a whole. This was further exacerbated by the lack of City of Culture designation, as there wasn't an event to galvanise the voluntary sector or cultural organisations together.

> *"We had to explain who we are, what we were doing and why. There has been lots of reluctance around 'are they going to steal our volunteers?' - We are slowly making in-roads. Without the big bang (of the City of Culture status) it is very different."* Programme Lead

On reflection of this insight, some of the grantees suggested that their focus could have been with the smaller, more hyper-local organisations from the outset. They believe they could have built a stronger relationship with them and provided more effective infrastructural support.

Partnerships: Cultural Organisations

Cultural Sector Organisations

A big learning across the fund from grantees is around the time and resources needed for relationship building. All grantees started with different partnership collaborations, but little had much of their own placed-based volunteering infrastructure, so the early set-up of this grant required time to be spent on stakeholder engagement and partnership building with cultural organisations who may have some volunteers and opportunities, but may need some support with infrastructure.

> *"Things take time that you don't think about. When we were able to bring on more people it opened up time for the important relationship building"* Programme Lead

There was perhaps an assumption that as the programme focused on cultural volunteering, the sector would be fully willing and able to support it.

> *"Some cultural orgs were hesitant to engage due to limited resources, time constraints, and scepticism about funding sustainability."* Programme Lead

However, it became apparent that cultural organisations were at different levels of understanding of how to best work with volunteers, even if they needed them to support with events and activities. Some cultural organisations had more experience working with volunteers and others, despite seeing the benefits of volunteering broadly, questioned how easily they could create volunteer experiences. This was in part due to a lack of vision around flexible volunteering, rather than need. This led to a lot of groundwork needing to be done in relationship building and exploring how to engage volunteers well and be supported whilst doing so.

The programme identified some barriers around the lack of understanding of volunteering infrastructure that cultural organisations had, such as knowing the basic information around creating an volunteer experience, or having time or knowledge to do the relevant research to have volunteer infrastructure in place, highlighting the value and importance of this grant for smaller organisations.

> *"Small grassroots organisations don't see themselves like charities do, they don't see the infrastructure needing to be in place."* Programme Lead

Partnerships: Cultural Organisations

As mentioned previously, whist grantees were not creating the volunteering roles, in their search to find opportunities with cultural organisations, they quickly learnt that whilst needs were there, the cultural organisations needed much more input in order to benefit from volunteers and provide excellent volunteering experiences.

This meant that grantees pivoted in their roles by **supporting the cultural organisation to develop the basic foundations of volunteering infrastructure** such as helping with job descriptions and training and to bridge gaps in volunteer support. At times they also found that they **had to source out volunteer opportunities from cultural organisations rather than them being easily available.** This was driven less by need for these organisations, and more by lack of understanding of how to benefit from volunteers and work with them well. Medway Change Makers addressed this challenge head-on by organising a roundtable for the cultural sector to understand how to best work with one another to support the volunteering infrastructure of the programme. (See case study on the next page.) Through their ongoing commitment to partnership work, The Bradford team report that they *"have strengthened collaboration across cultural institutions that had previously operated independently."*

Raising awareness and offering training and support to cultural organisations has become a common thread across the grantees. The Amdani! Conwy original partnership was made up of the volunteering arm of the Council in partnership with a cultural disability expert organisation that was embedded from the start of the programme and was well known in the sector. The range of skills offered by partners, enabled them to develop relationships and trust with a wide range of cultural organisations. It meant they were able to provide these organisations with advice and training on volunteering infrastructure, allowing more volunteers to be involved. They were also allocated as delivery partners for a main annual event, meaning they were able to lead the volunteer drive, training and experience with their approach to accessibility.

> *"It's been excellent working with Amdani, they bring an extra element. Great to be working with their group of volunteers and to be giving them an opportunity to try something different. But it has also been great for us to have that experience working with volunteers with different skills and experiences."* Cultural Organisation

Partnerships: Cultural Sector Case Study

Medway Change Makers

They wanted understand the expectations and challenges the cultural sector had with supporting volunteers in their organisations.

What they did

Invited a diverse range of participants to a cultural sector roundtable including volunteers, small cultural organisations, and larger institutions which rely heavily on volunteers to explore; perceptions of volunteering, challenges in managing volunteers and potential solutions for improving volunteer experiences and organisational capacity.

Insights gathered

- Volunteer management needs investment - While volunteers provide invaluable support, managing them requires resources, time, and careful planning. Much of this was provided by Medway Change Makers, but organisations also needed to invest in setting up structures and training to ensure volunteers feel supported and appreciated.
- Flexible solutions are key - Offering volunteers flexible roles that fit their lifestyles and interests is crucial for long-term engagement. Involving volunteers in planning will also deepen their connection to the organisation.
- Recognition and celebration are essential - Formal recognition of volunteer contributions is vital. Organisations should create structured programmes that reward volunteers, boosting morale and encouraging retention.

Lessons learnt

- The roundtable provided a great insight into real life challenges cultural organisations faced with considering offering volunteering options.
- It challenged assumptions that cultural organisations know about volunteering and would be happy to offer it.
- It enabled Medway Change Makers to recognise their important role in acting as a bridge between volunteers and the cultural sector by continuing to support both volunteers and organisations with clearer structures, training, signposting and opportunities for more meaningful engagement and ongoing community-building efforts.

To what extent has the goal around partnerships been achieved?

In response to the outcome **'We are more likely to take steps in partnerships to build a robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure'.** There have been great steps towards reaching this goal.

Partnership working was challenging for all the grantees during the funding period. A range of factors affected how partnerships were initiated, developed and built to strength. These included the difference between the grant application and reality of early delivery, changes in the council relationships and role, changes in lead organisations and changing priorities for partners locally. We learnt that whilst there may be needs for volunteers, sector partners may benefit from more nuanced support in how to work with volunteers and in infrastructural support. Local partnerships with organisations of different size and scale are key to have maximum impact, with each bringing different challenges – all of which are surmountable.

All grantees would be able to now reflect that they are more **aware of how partnership working needs to happen**. So that they can create a robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure programmes. They are all working towards sustaining the inclusive volunteering infrastructure they have built as part of the Volunteering Cities grant programme.

B. Accessibility

Spirit of 2012 asks of the grant
A specific goal of the Volunteering Cities grant was for cities to reduce barriers for people taking part. This is highlighted in two of the programme aims:

- Identify and engage a **cohort of new volunteers** who stand to **benefit from volunteering** with the project, and measure its impact on them;
- Generate insights into a number of key areas, including the rural volunteering infrastructure, **how to recruit and retain people who are least likely to volunteer**, and **how an inclusive and diverse volunteering offer can deliver community wellbeing and culture-led regeneration strategies.**

A pot of up to **£50,000** was set aside for each city to focus on **achieving accessibility aims** which equated to 20% of their overall grant fund.

Theory of Change goals
The theme of accessibility was a priority for the programme and featured across the theory of change with what the programme aimed to achieve. These are as follows:

- **'We know more about how to engage a diverse and representative range of communities in volunteering.'**
- **'We are more likely to build accessibility into designing volunteering opportunities.'**

Accessibility Approach

Programme	Aims of their programme around accessibility	Approach to accessibility
Amdani! Conwy	More deaf & disabled people contribute to decision making & take leadership volunteer roles in the cultural sector.	Their whole volunteer approach was to provide accessible volunteering infrastructure from the start to be inclusive to all volunteers no matter the need.
Bradford Cultural Volunteering Programme	Creating new and innovative approaches to making volunteering more accessible, volunteers will better reflect the district demographic.	Taking opportunities to reach areas that were not yet engaging and co-creating opportunities with communities.
Great Yarmouth and East Suffolk Cultural Connections	Using arts, culture and heritage volunteering to improve the wellbeing and life chances of its target groups, including young people, those living in deprived areas, disabled people and those experiencing social isolation.	Offered 'Accessibility Grants' to cultural organisations to decide on their own needs to be more accessible.
Medway Change Makers	Transactional 'micro' volunteering at cultural events enabling a greater diversity of one-off and repeat volunteers who would otherwise face barriers to participating as equals.	Focused on offering an accessible 'Peer Volunteer' opportunity to a small group of people living with a learning disability, autism and/or neurodivergent needs.

Accessibility Approach

Approaches

All cities had strong aims and ambitions to utilise the accessibility aspect of the grant fund to enhance their volunteering infrastructure. This was shaped both by their original programme aims and ambitions and the stakeholders they partnered with as seen in the table on the previous page.

They opted to used their 'Accessibility' funding pot (20% of their grant funding) in different ways.

Expanding their **'Accessibility' and 'diversity'** were key aims for **Bradfords volunteering programme** in order to portray their diverse city in readiness for the City of Culture designation in 2025. This was part of their vision and image for their inclusive city. They have reported improvements in accessibility, especially around the use of translation, and are proud of the increase in the diversity of their volunteers.

Amdani Conwy! opted for a fully embedded approach to accessibility from the outset, planning for and employing a specific **accessibility and inclusion role** that enabled this to be the focus of all they did. They also utilised their budgets in creating accessible training and resources and addressed barriers volunteers had in order to participate. (See case study)

Accessibility: Case Study

Amdani! Conwy's aim was to create an accessible volunteering infrastructure from the start to be inclusive to all volunteers no matter the need. ***"With the access support for volunteers we hope to offer a programme which values people and their lived experience to transform the cultural and voluntary sector"*** Programme Lead

What they did:

Staffing
- Planned for an Access and Inclusion Officer from the start to work with organisations and volunteers to develop accessible volunteering opportunities and help structure things to be more inclusive.
- Used the social model of understanding disability, that was created by disabled people, which tells us people are disabled by barriers in society and not their impairments or conditions.
  - *"This underpins how Amdani works and we focus a lot of our energy on offering additional sport to enable volunteers to get involved and have experiences they otherwise wouldn't have access to."* Access and Inclusion Officer

Training and resources
- Created resources and training around access and inclusion for volunteers and cultural organisations.
  - *"I'm with a group of nice people and they cater for people with all types of needs."* Volunteer
- Used their budget to pay for interpreters and personal assistants to support volunteers.
- Used budget to pay for transport. Engaged with taxi companies to ensure they had cars suitable such as for wheelchairs etc.
- Made their website fully accessible through use of print, colour, using BSL and subtitles on videos.
- Created an accessible film to show the impact of the programme - in Both English and Welsh with subtitles and BSL.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8FrTXGrgU4

continued…

Volunteer support
- Developed a supportive programme for their volunteers to enable people to volunteer for the first time.
- Ran monthly coffee mornings to enable volunteers to meet one another and an opportunity to sign up in person to future sessions which helped those that were not digitally connected.
- Offered Tempo Time credits to volunteers and helped them spend them by organising group days out for volunteered who were unable to attend individually.
- Ran an accessible volunteer celebration events to offer volunteers an opportunity to come together and thank them.

Lessons learnt
- That a specific role on an Accessibility and Inclusion Officer embedded early in the programme ensured accessibility was at the heart of what they were doing, However, earlier involvement at the application stage would have been welcome further.
- That a duty of care is identified at the start and boundaries are in place when working with volunteers that may need extra support and are not receiving it.
- Training and onboarding of organisations with the social model of disability takes time to embed and resources are needed to continue to upkeep that level of commitment and understanding.
- Access requirements are of high cost (travel, extra staff, staff time, developing resources) and need continuous funding and support to ensure the programme is able to support and sustain volunteers.
- The developing and sharing training around accessibility and inclusion was beneficial for all of their volunteers no matter their needs in order to work well together as well as for cultural organisations. However, it is clear to ensure this message caters for all volunteers not just those with accessibility requirements.

Accessibility Approaches

Other locations were able to focus their accessibility funding on specific programmes, creating new structures and ideas.

Cultural Connections in Great Yarmouth and East Suffolk **decided to offer their funding over to the cultural sector** so they had the autonomy to decide themselves how best to make their volunteering opportunities more accessible. They **set up accessibility grants** for organisations to apply for and were used for physical items such as accessible toilets as well as offering costs to cover attending volunteering events such as childcare where volunteering for a single mum was previously not accessible.

Medway Change Makers used some of their funding allocation **to run a focused programme to support new volunteers** through a learning approach by working with an arts organisation with experience of offering **accessible opportunities for participation**. (See case study on next page).

Accessibility: Case Study

Medway Change Makers

What did they did
Medway Change Makers focused on offering an accessible 'Peer Volunteer' opportunity to a small group of people living with a learning disability, autism and/or neurodivergent needs that was led by Square Pegs Arts.

The focus of the programme was to develop leadership skills to those that may have struggled with accessing mainstream volunteering opportunities.

How they did it
The programme included volunteer training around facilitating, safeguarding, equity, diversity and inclusion before working as a Peer Volunteer that supported Square Pegs Arts participants in their weekly drama groups.

Placements ran for a 5 week term where volunteers were offered around 1.5 hours a week.

What was the outcome?
Peer Volunteers had an opportunity to learn to advocate for their own needs in a safe and supported space and resources and learning tools were created to support future training.

To what extent has the goal around accessibility been achieved?

For the goal '**We know more about how to engage a diverse and representative range of communities in volunteering.**' Grantees have used and captured different methods for reaching new volunteers across each location. They developed new attractive offers in cultural volunteering, flexibility with one-off options, and various types of volunteering opportunities.

For the goal '**We are more likely to build accessibility into designing volunteering opportunities.'** The development of training and educating the cultural sector on accessibility, has been supported the grantees. All grantees and partners with whom they have worked are now better informed to ensure this is built into future volunteer opportunities from education, training, support as well as suitability for people to take part.

C. Diversifying Volunteers

Spirit of 2012 asks of the grant
A specific goal of the Volunteering Cities grant was to attract a range of new volunteers to their cultural programmes.

- Identify and engage a **cohort of new volunteers** who stand to **benefit from volunteering** with the project, and measure its impact on them;
- Generate insights into a number of key areas, including the rural volunteering infrastructure, **how to recruit and retain people who are least likely to volunteer**, and **how an inclusive and diverse volunteering offer can deliver community wellbeing and culture-led regeneration strategies.**

Theory of Change goals
Two goals within the theory of change refer to diversifying their volunteers as follows:

- **'We are more likely to take steps in partnerships to build a robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure.'**
- **'We know more about how to engage a diverse and representative range of communities in volunteering.'**

Diversifying Volunteers

There was a collective approach across the grantees to **find new ways to encourage a diverse volunteer cohort**, whereby the opportunities to volunteer were attracting and encouraging people to volunteer from more diverse backgrounds. Grantees employed a range of outreach and comms strategies to encourage a more diverse volunteer base, **be it with young people, people with learning support needs, people new to the place, people from diverse heritage backgrounds and language, or people with accessibility needs.** Depending on the size and demographics of the grantee locations, inviting and encouraging diversity involved creativity and commitment from grantees and their partners.

Bradford's approach to their volunteering programme was focused heavily of **having a diverse representation of their city** and were able to test **new ways to engage with the public to enable people to volunteer for the first time** as well as be representative of their city. (See case study on the next page).

Amdani! Conwy recognised the importance of **offering social connections for volunteers** to first get involved in volunteering where they had not previously been able to do, **through help and support offered at regular coffee mornings.**

> *"The in-person aspect of our programme of support was key for us but also took a lot of resource.* Project Lead

These sessions were run to support volunteers to learn about and sign-up to volunteering sessions and also ensure support for any accessibility need was catered for. The social aspect of these sessions enabled volunteers to get to also build on their confidence to volunteer.

Diversifying Volunteers: Case Study

Bradford Cultural Volunteering Programme
Bradford is the youngest City in the UK and most ethnically diverse outside of London. Grantees see this as a huge part of their identity and strength in their bid to become the City of Culture 2025. They set out to improve access to volunteering and help volunteers better reflect the district demographic.

What they did:
- Worked with local universities to attract a diverse range of volunteers.
- Started to engage young people at aged 17 with their outreach so they can volunteer once they turned 18.
- Focused their logo and design on being young and fresh making a statement.
- Took volunteer opportunities to districts they wanted to engage with in partnership with community groups and spaces.
- Recruited volunteer coordinators within areas they wanted to reach to obtain
- Worked with local organisations who are focused on supporting support minority groups
- Employed an access coordinator to support volunteers with needs
- Considered volunteer needs at events and training such as access to prayer rooms, offering quiet spaces, providing ear defenders and being conscious of religious holidays.
- Engaged with those taking ESOL classes, adult skills and DWP for those job seekers to offer volunteering to support their goals.
- Worked with Refugee Action to support asylum seekers and refugees experience volunteering .
- Bradford Buddy scheme- enabling volunteers to support one another at events.

They achieved
- 1780 volunteers as of their launch in Jan 2025
- Huge age range including 24% of young volunteers aged 18-74
- 24 languages spoken across their volunteers
- A representational spread of ethnic diverse groups with 59% from a non white British background.

All of this with the goal to improve their overall volunteering infrastructure in preparation to maximise their legacy post 2025.

Diversifying Volunteers

Medway Change Makers found that offering social events supported their **volunteers to build connections with each other** and led to them signing up to future sessions together **helping support the retention of volunteers.**

> *"Listening to volunteers and provisioning opportunities for social connection is important- they help support one another."*
> Programme Lead

Cultural Connections in Great Yarmouth experienced some different challenge using the term 'cultural volunteering':

> *"The term cultural volunteering has actually been a challenge, a hindrance... It has been confused by some of the more Reform sporting members of the population, as being something bad."* Programme Lead

This also reflected in their aims to diversify their volunteers.

> *"We've had a lot of social media push for volunteers, and some of the comments on there were really unpleasant... trying to explain that this is not about immigrants."* Programme Lead.

This shows an important lesson on the use of language and wider inclusivity across partnerships on an agreed vision for the cultural volunteering programme.

Diversifying Volunteers

Measuring Diversity

Grantees can only be confident that they are diversifying the volunteering workforce, by **knowing at the start of the programme, how diverse their place is and who is missing from their engagement**. Then, among those who are missing, which demographics are they hoping to include. They need to figure out how to reach them, and once they have they have achieved what they have set out to do. Along the way, they need to capture interesting learnings around barriers and enablers to changing the demographics of their volunteers.

The funder requirement is twofold: topline information with a high level demographic breakdown across gender, ethnicity, disability & age but and an expectation that if the grant is aiming to reach x or y, grantees they need to demonstrate how this can be done.

For grantees **this type of data collection was challenging**, particularly with regards to the practical challenges of collecting some basic demographic information. A few of the locations encountered difficulties with their systems set-up for capturing volunteering data, both with platforms and systems used. They also found it hard to understand what data was needed for monitoring purposes. For example, Great Yarmouth and East Suffolk encountered challenges with collecting this data due to multiple cross county systems being used and others experienced their own data points not matching the existing criteria that was being measured. Some grantees found some of the questions intrusive as they were needing to ask them in person due to their support needs rather than being done online or in confidence.

In order to consider different measurements relating to volunteering infrastructure itself then see the recommendations in section 2 of this report.

To what extent has the goal around diversity been achieved?

In terms of the goal '**We are more likely to take steps in partnerships to build a robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure.'** Grantees have learnt much about diversifying their volunteers through outreach and partnerships, and experienced a range of challenges in the process. However, they all agree that building these partnerships and developing relationships in an ongoing way with the community, has helped widen the volunteer base and support the development of an inclusive volunteer infrastructure.

For the goal **"We know more about how to engage a diverse and representative range of communities in volunteering.'** Much outreach has been done to try and increase the diversity of volunteers, and new volunteers have been recruited across all the sites. These volunteers anecdotally come from a more diverse background, reflecting age, heritage, faith and as explored earlier, accessibility. The Volunteering Cities programme was able to achieve its goal of increasing volunteering participation for those not usually volunteering and to wider the diversity of volunteers in each place. However, measuring diversity has been challenging and in some locations inconsistent and needs an agreed way to capture change that ensures these goals are reached but does not feel too intrusive to volunteers.

D. Legacy

So far we have explored the short and longer term goals grantees hoped to achieve throughout the Volunteering Cities programme. The ultimate impact leading to: '**4 x Volunteering Cities sites have a legacy of robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure.'**

It's useful to look at the term 'legacy' to see what impact this Volunteering Cities grant has had in all 4 locations.
*In the context of events, "legacy" refers to the **long-term positive impacts an event leaves behind** on the **host community, attendees**, and other **stakeholders**, including social, economic, and environmental benefits that extend well beyond the event itself; essentially, the lasting impression or influence an event has on a **place** or **people after it is over.***

In this context, within the time frame of this funding we can see that there will be **many lasting benefits, as a result of the funding contributing to and sometimes kick starting place-based cultural volunteering infrastructure**. All grantees have used their grants responding to needs on the ground, building relationships and partnership to increase accessibility and inclusivity in cultural volunteering. The programmes have left a lot of learning, training, tools and infrastructure behind.

Grantees have struggled with balancing process and delivery, and have been concerned what to do once this funding ends to sustain and build on the work they have done. It is therefore harder to measure the long-term legacy from the Volunteering Cities grant. However, we can look at likelihood and conditions created for a legacy to be possible in order to understand how much of the impact goal has been achieved.

Legacy for the Volunteering Cities

The three locations that had not received the City of Culture designation have left the following legacies in place:

Amdani! Conwy are passing the programme ownership over to the Conwy Voluntary Service who are taking on the ownership of the future voluntary programme and continuing to run the engagement coffee mornings until July. They are applying for focused funding to support their volunteering programme along with a wider social prescribing model that has an ongoing focus on accessibility.

Cultural Connections Volunteering in Great Yarmouth are applying for funding as part of heritage to enable their volunteering infrastructure to continue to support programmes and looking at further research funding to capture learning. East Suffolk are looking at broadening their opportunities and partnerships in the region to continue their own.

Medway Change Makers are transferring their role from Ideas Test (who incubate community projects) across to Tempo where the future of the volunteering programme best fits and future funding scoping is taking place to continue the work.

At the time of reporting, each of the locations were in conversations for future funding and support for their volunteering Infrastructure to continue and be embedded into the sustainability of their places.

Legacy

Bradford

The legacy of this funding for Bradford, who won the City of Culture 2025, is a different story, as their funding legacy is more tightly linked to the designation. The Bradford team were able to **start planning their legacy overall and specifically relating to volunteering infrastructure early on in the grant cycle,** so that they can contribute to place and have a **cultural impact**. They have achieved a lot in the development of their Volunteering Infrastructure to set them up well for delivering the City of Culture and beyond.

> *"I feel like we've strengthened the infrastructure for volunteering really, really substantially. We've made a significant impact in the district." Programme Lead*

Bradford recognise the importance of developing a community approach and that the legacy for their Volunteering programme will be needed.

> *"You absolutely can achieve [community connection through volunteering], but those achievements can be fragile without substantial legacy that remains". Programme Lead*

They have received legacy funding for the next year to continue supporting the volunteering infrastructure programme post this grant fund and created a legacy network with volunteer managers across the Bradford district that meets regularly. They are now trying to cultivate this with a view to the legacy of the programme post 2025.

BRADFORD 2025
UK City of Culture

To what extent has the goal around legacy been achieved?

For the goal **'4 x Volunteering Cities sites have a legacy of robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure.'** We can see that all sites have come along way in both trying to create a robust and inclusive volunteering infrastructure for their legacy but that without further funding there is a risk that the programmes may not continue.

Despite the fact that three locations without the City of Culture designation faced challenges, but wanted to continue and have a greater impact means that they all believed that they reach a point where there work was making a difference locally. They could see that their programmes were filling a gap in accessible volunteering within the cultural sector. **They have forged partnerships, increased volunteering appetite and opportunities and put things in place to contribute to their local communities. They engaged volunteers in cultural events, iterated the infrastructure as they went, they were able to have an impact through learning by doing and supporting their places to offer up more cultural volunteering and place making.** Whilst it was hard setting up the cultural volunteering infrastructure, and the opportunities for volunteering too, they achieved much and their work will hopefully continue.

For Bradford, they have also been on a huge learning journey as part of this grant that they have valued in order to focus on their volunteering infrastructure and are continuing to develop and lead their cultural programme in 2025. We look forward to seeing what their legacy for cultural volunteering will be.
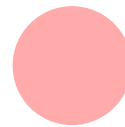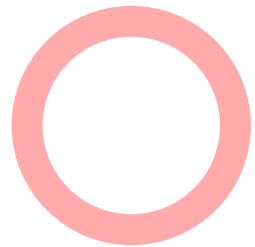
6. Recommendations

Recommendations for funders of Volunteering Infrastructure programmes

Our learning partnership had enabled us to review both the grantees progress with their volunteering infrastructure programmes as well as take a wider view on the grant programme as a whole. Below are recommendations for future funders of volunteering infrastructure programmes.

1 Encourage applicants to be **realistic with what they can achieve** with 2 years of funding for volunteering infrastructure, especially when starting from scratch.

2 Recognise that **time-limited funding** can only do so much for volunteering infrastructure – it cannot be supported as a "one off."

3 Reward applicants for **being honest about their limitations at application stage**, enabling the funding to have most positive impact from whatever their starting point.

4 Indicators or KPIs should focus on **volunteer infrastructure development** rather than volunteer wellbeing as these are evidenced elsewhere.

5 Funded projects could be encouraged to **refine their Monitoring and Evaluation frameworks** (and indicators) **as they develop a deeper understanding of their needs and challenges**, baking in reflection sessions to the grantee catch up meetings.

Recommendations for places developing their Volunteering Infrastructure

Below are recommendations for places developing their Volunteering Infrastructure programmes.

1 **Partnerships** - Build up your partnerships at the start to understand what you wish to achieve with volunteering infrastructure and what already exists and build from there to avoid replication or misunderstanding.

2 **Accessibility** - Start with a value of making your volunteering experience accessible to all and your programme will grow and develop to be inclusive. Bring in key partners in at the start to ensure this is the focus.

3 **Diversity** - Ensure your outreach for your programme takes place in all areas to include different communities and your partnerships, staffing and cultural activities are diverse.

4 **Legacy** - Consider the long term sustainability of your volunteering programme from the start and agree this within your partnership so that the conversation is ongoing throughout any funding you receive.

Some unanswered questions: which may be interesting to think about for future grant making of second place funding

? What would happen if the injection of funding was more open and grantees had a choice of how to invest in their local place (volunteering infrastructure being one option), but instead more closely linked to place making?

? Whether designing the volunteering infrastructure for culture is different than other types of volunteering? We don't know if something different needs to be included to create the basic foundations, as there didn't seem to be ready made opportunities for people to get involved in.

? What it would have been like if there were 'ready made' opportunities for volunteers in cultural organisations. There was an assumption that there would have been, but the organisations were not creating them. We also do not know what the experience was like for cultural organisations.

? Whether this funding would have stretched further for organisations that got further in the City of Culture competition? (Excl. Bradford) as their projects were more likely developed at that stage and would require less investment in set up

? What the outcome would be if there was an already existing volunteering infrastructure in each location?

Thank you

Marnie Freeman: Marnie@neighbourlylab.com
Annette Holman: Annette@neighbourlylab.com

www.neighbourlylab.com