Know Your Neighbourhood Fund

Norfolk: Know Your Neighbourhood Fund report
Great Yarmouth place-based research

Published 25/09/2025

Norfolk Community Foundation

Contents

Executive Summary

This report presents place-based research on the Know Your Neighbourhood (KYN) programme in Great Yarmouth, funded by the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) through UK Community Foundations. The KYN Fund is an up to £30 million package of funding designed to widen participation in volunteering and tackle loneliness in 27 disadvantaged areas across England.

Norfolk Community Foundation (NCF) conducted a qualitative study to examine barriers to social connection, the role of local assets, and insights into participation and volunteering. The KYN programme funded Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprises (VCSEs) to reach those new to volunteering and/or at risk of, or experiencing, chronic loneliness. Through place-based research, NCF sought to provide insight on the experiences of target populations, the learning of VCSEs, and to provide recommendations for future programmes.

Barriers to reducing loneliness and increasing social connection

Contributors identified a range of factors influencing loneliness and social isolation. Place-based barriers to reducing loneliness and building social connections were identified as deprivation, seasonal coastal cycles, a decline in free-to-access third spaces (typically public spaces outside the home or workplace), low awareness of community activities, antisocial behaviour and travel. Emotional and individual challenges to reducing loneliness and building social connections included poor mental health, traumatic experiences, digital barriers, challenging neighbours, and a perceived lack of intercultural and ethnic connection.

Overcoming barriers to reducing loneliness: Asset-based approaches

During the KYN programme, VCSEs in Great Yarmouth built on local assets, including spaces, people, and networks, to deliver activities designed to promote meaningful social connections and reduce loneliness and social isolation. Social and

human assets, including trusted relationships and individual skills, play a key role in engagement. Collaboration with statutory essential services, including GPs, social prescribers, and the Job Centre, creates vital contact points, though it was noted some partnerships could be improved. Relationships with Great Yarmouth Borough Council were largely positive, particularly through network meetings that helped to increase awareness of local opportunities.

Learning from the experiences of individuals in reducing loneliness

Participants often stated that they were not naturally inclined to be social and relied on others to motivate them to socialise or reach out for support. While statutory services such as social prescribers were identified as motivating individuals to engage, friends and VCSE staff or volunteers were also mentioned. Methods ranged but the unifying factor was that a trusted individual made the referral and they took a person-centred approach. When speaking about their experiences of volunteering with VCSE groups, many participants preferred to describe their involvement as **'helping out,'** not because of what the activity involved, but because of how they perceived the term **'volunteering.'**

Recommendations

Recommendations to alleviate barriers to building social connections and reducing loneliness include building the evidence base on the felt experience of loneliness and factors that enable individuals to connect with others; increasing opportunities for integration between cultures to reduce barriers to social connection; employing an accessible asset-based approach to reduce barriers to social connection; and investing in people and relationships to increase participation and reduce loneliness.

Introduction

Context

Norfolk Community Foundation (NCF) received £1,306,667 funding from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) through UK Community Foundations (UKCF) in 2023-2025 of the Know Your Neighbourhood (KYN) programme. The KYN Fund is an up to £30 million package of funding designed to widen participation in volunteering and tackle loneliness in 27 disadvantaged areas across England. KYN has four key aims:

- To build the evidence to identify scalable and sustainable place-based interventions that work in increasing regular volunteering and reducing chronic loneliness.
- To increase the proportion of people in targeted high-deprivation local authorities who volunteer at least once a month.
- To reduce the proportion of chronically lonely people in targeted high-deprivation local authorities who lack desired level of social connections.
- To enable targeted high-deprivation local authorities, and the local voluntary and community sector in these places, to implement sustainable systems and processes that encourage volunteering and tackling loneliness.

Great Yarmouth was targeted in Norfolk as an area that could benefit from investment due to the area's high levels of isolation and low levels of pride in the local area to work with the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector to increase volunteering. NCF distributed funding to 16 VCSE organisations over two years from April 2023 – March 2025, following a discovery phase, with total grant sizes ranging from between £6,000 to £135,000.

During the final year of the programme, 2024-25 NCF was funded by DCMS to conduct place-based research relating to KYN funding in Great Yarmouth to complement existing monitoring and evaluation.

Methodology

The KYN programme funded VCSEs to reach those new to volunteering and/or at risk of, or experiencing, chronic loneliness. In this research, loneliness is defined as **"a negative feeling people experience when the relationships they have do not match up to those they would like to have"** – it is related to whether a person's social connections feel meaningful and meet their emotional needs.[1] By contrast, social isolation describes **"the quantity or frequency of contact with others rather than the quality of relationships."**[2] It is therefore possible for a person to feel lonely even when they are surrounded by people, and likewise a person may not feel lonely simply because they are isolated. Through place-based research, NCF's goal was to provide insight on the experiences of target populations, the learning of VCSEs, and to provide recommendations for future programmes. To do this NCF focused on four key questions:

- What barriers do people experience in building social connections to reduce the feeling of loneliness, and to what extent is this affected by being a coastal community?
- How could we use existing or new assets to overcome these barriers?
- What can we learn from the experiences of our participants, which contributes to reductions in loneliness?
- What actionable insights can be developed and shared which could assist in the development of similar initiatives in the future?

For the place-based research to complement national monitoring processes, NCF took a more in-depth qualitative approach, and the research was weighted on the following two priorities:

- A focus on loneliness, and participation in community activities to reduce loneliness.

---

[1] Age UK, *You are not alone in feeling lonely: Loneliness in later life*, December 2024, p. 6
[2] Age UK, *You are not alone in feeling lonely: Loneliness in later life*, December 2024, p. 7

- What can be gained through working collaboratively with local statutory services and how this can be done.

A team of four NCF staff members conducted interviews with 10 participants who had engaged with funded VCSE projects (six of whom were volunteering), five staff members or volunteers in leadership positions from VCSE organisations, and two staff members from the local Borough Council.[3] NCF also provided one training workshop on evaluation methods, including focus group methods, and subsequently funded four VCSEs to run focus groups with their participants and volunteers. This enabled the research team to collect detailed individual perspectives and to combine these with insights from broader group discussions from a wider range of individuals and VCSEs.

Thematic analysis was used to draw out organising concepts across all interviews and focus groups that related to the research questions and priorities. As well as commonalities, key differences between individual perspectives were highlighted to convey the range of experiences among people living in Great Yarmouth.

The following methodological limitations to this research have been acknowledged:

- The terms loneliness and social isolation were used synonymously and interchangeably by participants in interviews and focus groups, suggesting a slippage in meaning between the terms amongst the general public. As a result, findings relating to individuals' experiences of loneliness versus isolation are less clearly distinguished.
- The KYN programme aimed to engage new participants and volunteers, however the research took place at the end of the two years of funding. As a result, contributors to this research had begun their participation during KYN, but at this stage had been participating or volunteering for a period of time already.

---

[3] See Appendix 1 for a list of participating VCSE and Statutory organisations.

- The research team held interviews between 9am – 5pm during the week due to NCF staff scheduling. As a result, this research is less likely to reflect the experiences of individuals who work or have caring responsibilities during these times.

- Young people were not well represented in interviews due to scheduling difficulties with the young peoples' project funded through KYN. Young people are one of the loneliest demographics, with up to 36% of 16-24 year olds reporting that they feel lonely and 31% reporting they feel isolated, which is higher than any other age group in the UK, but this research is less likely to reflect young people's perspectives.[4]

Glossary of terms

Term	Definition
Asset, Community	Physical spaces and buildings within the community (built assets), the skills, abilities, and experience of individuals (human assets), and the networks and relationships that exist within and between groups (social assets).
Asset Loop	The process by which investment in assets, such as individuals or infrastructure, strengthens the overall resources and capabilities within a community.
Blue Spaces	Water-based environments such as rivers, lakes, canals, and coastal areas that contribute to well-being and community engagement.
Built Assets	Physical spaces and infrastructure within a community, such as buildings, roads, public spaces, and facilities, which support social, economic, and cultural activities.
Minoritised ethnicity/ Minoritised ethnic	Refers to all ethnic groups except white British. This includes white minority groups such as Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller communities.
Green Spaces	Natural outdoor areas such as parks, woodlands, and gardens that provide opportunities for recreation, relaxation, and social interaction.

---

[4] The Princes Trust, *The Princes' Trust NatWest Youth Index 2024*, 29th January 2024, p.8-9

Helper/Helping out	A person who informally assists within a community or organisation, offering support in a flexible, often unstructured way, without identifying as a volunteer.
Human Assets	The collective skills, abilities, knowledge, and experiences of individuals within a community, contributing to its overall capacity and resilience.
Loneliness	A subjective feeling of lacking meaningful social relationships, which may occur even when surrounded by people, stemming from a mismatch between desired and actual social connections.
Participant	Someone who engages in an activity or service for personal benefit, such as receiving support, learning, or social interaction, without taking on a formal role within the organisation.
Social Assets	The networks, relationships, and social structures that connect individuals and groups, fostering trust, collaboration, and community cohesion.
Social Isolation	A lack of social connections, often due to external barriers such as geographic location, financial constraints, or life circumstances, leading to limited interaction with others.
VCSE Leader	A person in a leadership role within a Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisation, responsible for guiding strategy, managing resources, and supporting community initiatives.
Volunteer	An individual who actively contributes time and effort to support a cause, organisation, or community without financial compensation, often taking on responsibilities within a structured role.

Findings

1: Barriers to reducing loneliness and increasing social connection

In interviews and focus groups, the research team investigated local factors and other barriers that people experience to reducing feelings of loneliness and building social connections.

1.1 Place-based factors to building social connections and reducing loneliness

Deprivation

National data indicates a clear link between loneliness and deprivation, with the Community Life Survey reporting that adults from the two lowest deprivation (the most deprived) deciles (11%) were more likely to say that they felt lonely often or always compared with adults from all other deciles (8% to 4%).[5] Within the study, contributors made links between deprivation and loneliness, with a reduction in opportunities to make social connections as the principal driver. Seasonal cycles were also identified as significant in relation to social connection.

Employment was seen as both a barrier and enabler to achieving desired levels of social connection. In Great Yarmouth in 2023, 5.4% of people were unemployed compared to an average of 3.4% in England as a whole.[6] Great Yarmouth residents face challenges gaining secure employment due to the seasonal nature of employment opportunities. Many individual and focus group participants interviewed in the research were not in regular employment.

---

[5] DCMS (Dec 2024) 'Community Life Survey 2023/24: Loneliness and support networks.' https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202324-annual-publication/community-life-survey-202324-loneliness-and-support-networks--2

[6] Office for National Statistics (ONS). (n.d.). Local statistics for Great Yarmouth.

Participants who had been employed reported that work was a source of social interaction, and when this work ceased, they became more isolated. One participant described their parents as more socially isolated because they did not work or volunteer, as they and their older siblings did. They further linked this to loneliness they felt in their youth: **"Because they were always in the house, I was as well."** Conversely, work was also seen as a barrier to increasing social connection, with VCSE leaders highlighting that daytime activities were less accessible to workers. Those unable to work due to disabilities, care responsibilities or mental health challenges described facing greater loneliness and isolation, having fewer opportunities for social connection.

Low income, linked to unemployment, was identified as a barrier to building social connection. The price of accessing activities and social spaces – especially in the winter months where there was a perceived lack of free-to-access spaces and activities – was a barrier for many. Free-to-access spaces, activities and services were therefore identified as key to ensuring desired levels of social connection.

Participants also linked deprivation to other social problems prevalent in Great Yarmouth as a whole, such as antisocial behaviour, which they suggested impacted opportunities for social connection. Participants identified various forms of antisocial behaviour, including shoplifting, stone-throwing, shouting, verbal abuse, threats, indecent exposure, drug use, littering, and homelessness. They reported avoiding public spaces such as parks, the town centre, and public transport due to these issues. Concerns about encountering antisocial behaviour also influenced when they felt safe accessing certain areas. Participants linked locations such as King Street, the seafront, and the Rows with antisocial behaviour, and explained how they would avoid walking through these areas to access other activities and spaces, especially at night.[7]

---

[7] See Appendix 3 for a list of places.

Public transport was generally unpopular among participants. While cost was a factor, a considerable concern was articulated about sharing space with passengers who might engage in antisocial behaviour. However, one participant preferred using public transport to avoid walking through the Rows, an area connecting many car parks to the high street, which he perceived as unsafe.

Reducing antisocial behaviour could help individuals feel more confident in accessing public spaces.

Community spaces and assets

There was a widespread feeling among contributors that Great Yarmouth was in a state of decline, presenting barriers to social connection.

Cafés, shops, pubs and tourist attractions were identified as spaces for forming and maintaining social connection. Cultural spaces such as Time and Tide Museum and events by local VCSEs such as Freshly Greated were also mentioned as offering opportunities for social connection.

A perceived decline in third spaces was identified as a barrier to forming social connections by participants. These locations outside of home and work where people historically gathered were identified as pubs, churches, shops and cafés. Participants reported that many former social spaces have been repurposed for housing or are vacant, limiting spaces for social interaction. They felt that Great Yarmouth's high street and shopping precincts were in decline, which led them to visit the town centre less often. However, out-of-town shopping areas were more positively reviewed, as were the shops in Norwich.

Participants described shopping with friends as a social activity, but for those who did not, they saw interactions with retail workers as a form of social connection. Additionally, participants who volunteered in retail outlets observed that some customers, particularly those they perceived to be experiencing loneliness, engaged in conversations with volunteers as a way to reduce loneliness. Cafés were also identified

as important social spaces, especially by women, for maintaining social connections. The cost of accessing cafés was criticised, however.

Participants also noted that many pubs had permanently closed. Those who used pubs reported enhanced social connections through activities such as karaoke and drinking with friends but did not see pubs as places to form new social connections. Nevertheless, pubs and similar alcohol-orientated spaces were not viewed universally as positive spaces for social connection. Those who preferred alcohol-free environments felt that social activities in Great Yarmouth were too often centred around drinking, making them unappealing or inaccessible. This was especially true for those who did not drink or wanted to socialise with their children, creating an additional barrier to social connection.

Participants and VCSEs identified distinct high and low seasons with inconsistent opportunities for social interaction. Summer was associated with the town being livelier and people having money to spend, with cafés, the Pleasure Beach and amusement arcades identified as opportunities to enhance social connections.[8] Green and blue spaces were accessed frequently in summer with social connection in mind, with places like St George's Park identified by women as key places to meet others with children to form and maintain social connections.[9] One participant, however, noted that as employment is more common in summer, working people are unable to take full advantage of the summer season.

Participants associated winter months with a decline in available groups and activities. A prevalent view was that the town 'shut down' over winter, with many social spaces like cafés closing for the season. Additionally, boarding houses and holiday lets often remained vacant during the winter, further limiting social interactions. Residents also highlighted that poor weather in winter makes it more challenging to use green and

---

[8] See Appendix 3.

[9] For definition of 'green space' and 'blue space', see Glossary of Terms (Appendix)

blue spaces to connect with others. Seasonal employment also means residents are less likely to have money to spend in this period, which was linked to being unable to access social spaces that were not free.

Awareness and accessibility of activities

Accessing social activities and support services were seen as crucial for reducing loneliness and social isolation, yet several barriers prevent people from participating. Challenges participants identified can be broadly categorised into accessibility issues—such as time constraints, travel reluctance, and caring responsibilities—and gaps in knowledge, particularly in how activities are promoted and communicated.

Parents and those with caring responsibilities faced additional challenges to accessing social spaces and activities. Participants who had previously been carers for family members described experiencing loneliness and social isolation during that time and struggling to reconnect once their caregiving duties ended. Great Yarmouth has seen a very large increase in the number of individuals providing 20-49 hours of unpaid care each week.[10] While local services exist to support carers, VCSEs noted that accessing them can be difficult. Challenges highlighted by parents, especially those with young children, revolved around children not always being welcome at social groups, limiting what they could attend. Even third spaces like cafés were not always child-friendly, lacking child-friendly amenities such as activity packs or play areas, reducing opportunities for social connection among parents.

Travel also presented a challenge. VCSEs and individuals highlighted that most people preferred activities close to home, accessible by foot. A variety of factors influenced this, including perceived threats to personal safety on public transport. VCSEs noted that if activities required long travel times or costly transportation,

---

[10] Office for National Statistics (ONS). (n.d.). *Census area changes: Great Yarmouth*.

participation generally dropped. This is particularly relevant for older adults, people with mobility issues, and those with limited financial means such as young people.

Although the KYN programme funded a wide range of activities with different levels of criteria for entry, some individuals felt excluded from social groups and support services due to specific eligibility criteria, such as age, financial status, or mental health needs. Some participants did not meet the required thresholds, making these groups inaccessible for building social connections. Others found their needs too complex for certain groups to accommodate, leaving them isolated. Even in groups open to all, participants did not always feel they belonged. One volunteer at Pathways felt out of place, as the group primarily supported those facing severe financial hardship – an experience he did not share. If a person feels like they do not **"belong"** in a group, participation can feel isolating. This highlights the importance of connecting with people with similar life experiences to foster a true sense of belonging.

Another consistent issue raised across different groups was the lack of a single, reliable source of information about activities. An online directory of services and activities was identified as an existing platform, but it was criticised for being challenging to use and having outdated information. Key means of learning about activities identified by participants included fragmented sources such as Facebook, websites, or word of mouth, all of which exclude certain demographics – especially older adults and those with low digital literacy. Word of mouth was identified as the main, and often preferred, means of learning about activities. Those who are already engaged in activities had better awareness of what was going on locally simply because they were already **"in the loop."** This suggests that social connection breeds more social opportunities, but also that those who are already isolated can remain so due to lack of access to information.

1.2 Emotional and individual challenges to building social connections

Many people felt there is a lack of community in the Great Yarmouth area. This was linked to various factors, including a lack of familiarity with neighbours, personal challenges around making connections with others, and challenges around modern technology. Migration and intercultural connections also featured heavily in discussions around building social connections.

Loneliness and isolation

The terms **'lonely'** and **'isolated'** were often used interchangeably by individuals and VCSE leaders, making it difficult to draw clear distinctions. Many interviewees did not describe themselves as lonely, even when they had experienced significant social isolation. This may be due to stigma or a lack of awareness of their loneliness before engaging with groups. One participant, who initially considered themselves sociable, reflected: **"I know more people in my local community. I have more conversations, I've gained more friends. I didn't consider myself lonely to start with, but I know more people. I have more conversations, so I must be less [lonely]."** Participants associated loneliness with a lack of connection to others or the wider community. They were more likely to describe themselves as isolated or as isolating themselves, though there was no consistent explanation for this.

Personal life challenges were the biggest barrier to overcoming loneliness and social isolation. Trauma, difficult relationships, and negative experiences often led to a loss of confidence and trust, making it harder to form new connections. Many participants linked their withdrawal from social life to major life events such as relationship breakdowns, abuse, harassment, health issues, or bereavement.

Some described their loneliness and isolation as self-imposed, stemming from feelings of being unsafe, unworthiness, or exhaustion. Cutting ties with old friends due to bad experiences often deepened their sense of loneliness and isolation. Many who identified in this way were aware of their withdrawal, with one participant stating: **"I'm**

good at staying lonely and isolating myself. I can do that very easily." These individuals often lacked trust in people and systems, making re-engagement challenging. Given these difficulties, safe and supportive environments were seen as essential. VCSEs highlighted the importance of spaces where people felt socially secure, allowing them to engage with others without fear of judgment. No overall characteristics emerged which suggested what made a place feel secure for participants, though having a trusted point of contact at the space emerged as a common factor. This suggests that structured, welcoming environments – where individuals feel understood and accepted – are crucial in helping people rebuild trust and reconnect with their communities.

Lack of social connections

The view that there is less of a sense of community in Great Yarmouth now than in the past was widespread across all contributors. Participants at community groups and activities felt connected with people at the group, but not always with those in their neighbourhood. Some found that attending very local groups enabled them to form lasting social connections with neighbours they had previously been unacquainted with. They also reported the joy of **'bumping'** into people they knew through participating in groups outside of group activities, such as when using the town centre.

Views were mixed on whether certain neighbourhoods were barriers to achieving greater social connection. Interaction within neighbourhoods could be positive, such as stopping for a chat in the street while walking the dog, 'bumping' into people at shops, or attending house parties. Negative experiences – such as confrontational or violent neighbours – made some residents fearful of leaving their homes. Smaller villages around Great Yarmouth such as Martham were often described as more favourable, community-orientated places to live, as was Gorleston.

A common concern was that Great Yarmouth's low rental prices encouraged councils to relocate **"people with problems"** to the area, leading to frequent population

turnover and making it harder for residents to form connections. Newcomers from both white British backgrounds and minoritised ethnic backgrounds reported feeling disconnected from the local population.

Technology has transformed the way people communicate and connect, offering both opportunities and challenges for social interaction. While technology and social media help people stay in touch, participants and VCSEs noted that they can also lead to fragmentation, isolation, and a decline in face-to-face interactions. Platforms like Facebook were useful for discovering local events and activities, but not everyone found them accessible. One VCSE leader highlighted how the shift to online communication has weakened physical communities, making real-world connections harder: **"The paradox is, the more that we've supposedly got connected over the last decade, the more fractured we've become as a society, and we need to try and find these physical spaces where we can come back together."**

Views on social media's impact on social connection were mixed. Some found it helped them join groups and overcome loneliness and isolation, while others saw it as a hostile or isolating space, citing experiences of toxicity and cyberbullying. An individual with a popular YouTube channel described feeling detached despite having thousands of online followers: **"I feel completely unconnected to a local community... I have a 'community' of nearly 6,000 subscribers to my YouTube channel, but I don't know these people, but they feel they know me."** Private social media, such as WhatsApp or closed Facebook groups, was seen as more effective in fostering positive online and in-person social connection.

A generational divide also emerged in interviews. Groups with a mix of ages, like those at St. George's Theatre, reported strong intergenerational connections. However, older individuals who were less involved in such activities felt unsure about interacting with younger people, often perceiving them as unapproachable or uninterested in community life. Some older volunteers also expressed concerns about unintentionally

offending younger generations or expressed anxiety about being perceived as acting inappropriately towards children and young people.

Migration and lack of integration

There has been an increase in people of minoritised ethnicity living in the Great Yarmouth area in recent years. Contributors perceived a lack of support around integration between white British people and people of minoritised ethnicity, which was perceived to have reduced opportunities for social connection. This was raised almost universally across groups, without prompting. Many of the barriers and opportunities for social connection were shared by all people regardless of their background. Nevertheless, it was acknowledged by both groups that there are challenges when it comes to integrating.

Many white British participants perceived a significant increase in minoritised ethnic populations in Great Yarmouth in recent years. This aligns with Census data showing that the rise in residents not identifying with a UK national identity was greater in Great Yarmouth (2.6 percentage points) than in the East of England and England overall. However, the total percentage of people without a UK national identity in Great Yarmouth remains lower than the national average.[11] Across all ethnic groups, there was a shared view that white British and minoritised ethnic communities were not well integrated, and that this had led to increased loneliness and social isolation.

A small number of contributors expressed the view that Great Yarmouth had been used by councils as a **"dumping ground"** due to its availability of cheap rental housing – largely in relation to migrants, but one white British participant applied this to their own experience with the council. However, a broader concern among interviewees was the influx of new arrivals and a perceived lack of integration between different cultural groups. Despite this, most expressed sympathy for minoritised ethnic residents,

---

[11] Office for National Statistics (ONS). (n.d.). *Census area changes: Great Yarmouth*.

acknowledging that they lacked adequate support. There was a shared desire for better integration, with recognition that responsibility lay with both migrants and the existing population.

Cultural and language differences were a source of anxiety among participants. When there were groups of people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds gathered in large groups on the street, especially if they were shouting, white British interviewees sometimes felt intimidated by their presence in certain areas. However, they recognised that this anxiety often stemmed from a lack of understanding rather than actual danger. People of minoritised ethnicity felt that language presented a significant barrier to integrating with both other minoritised ethnic communities and white British communities.

Both white British and minoritised ethnic participants wanted greater integration but identified language barriers and cultural differences as key challenges. White British participants often viewed people of minoritised ethnicity as a homogenous group, while migrants in the GYROS focus group shared a different perspective. Although they had local communities with shared language and culture, many socialised primarily with immediate family, mirroring the loneliness and isolation that white British participants described.

Children were seen as exceptions to these divides, acting as **"translators"** and **"points of contact"** between different ethnic groups. Another common view was that cultural activities and exhibitions could help bridge gaps between white British and minoritised ethnic communities.

2: Overcoming barriers to reducing loneliness: Asset-based approaches

Through interviews with VCSE leaders, this section examines how community interventions utilised both existing and new assets to address barriers to social connection and reducing loneliness. It also considers the relationship between community groups and statutory bodies in Great Yarmouth.

Rather than focusing on problems or deficiencies within the area, an asset-based approach seeks to identify and build upon available resources. While the term 'asset' is often associated with physical spaces, such as buildings or green and blue spaces, VCSE leaders described a broader definition, encompassing both physical infrastructure and human resources.

This section therefore distinguishes between different types of community assets that can support social interaction and reduce loneliness and isolation, including physical spaces and buildings within the community (built assets), the skills, abilities, and experience of individuals (human assets), as well as the networks and relationships that exist within and between groups (social assets).

2.1 Built assets

Built assets include a range of local spaces, from leisure and retail facilities to community centres and places of worship. These settings can provide opportunities for and facilitate social interaction and the development of meaningful relationships which reduce loneliness, but accessibility – both physical and perceived – can also act as a barrier.

Some locations used for the delivery of KYN funded activities, such as St George's Theatre café and PrimeYarc, were already established as community hubs. Others, including the Marina Centre and Gorleston Pavilion, had not previously been utilised for these types of activities. In both instances, VCSE leaders reported that using well-

known community spaces helped reduce barriers to participation by providing familiar settings.

During the KYN programme, built assets were used to deliver a range of social groups aimed at promoting social connections and reducing loneliness. These groups were typically centred around hobbies or interests, such as crafts or creative writing. Activities served as an initial point of engagement, attracting individuals who were already participating in these activities independently and wanted to share this with others, or those who aspired to learn a new skill.

One VCSE leader noted that providing a shared focus helped participants feel more at ease, enabling them to open up: **"By taking the focus away from sitting across a table with somebody talking to them, or even, you know, sitting around in a circle, giving them a focus meant that it took the focus away from perhaps their problem. But by doing so made them more open and more able to talk about where they were and why they felt the need to come along and what their problems were."**

In groups that offered activities focused on hobbies or interests, organisations noted these provided an incentive for individuals to attend. Over time, however, the primary motivation for attendance shifted from the activity itself to the opportunity for connection the group provided, with one organisation commenting that most of their creative writing sessions were taken up by social interaction rather than the activity. While social connection became the primary driver for continued participation, organisations also highlighted the importance of activities in building confidence and the development of skills, which also contributed to overall wellbeing.

Accessibility in the use of assets

As highlighted in the earlier discussion on local challenges in section 1.1, the accessibility of spaces was a key factor influencing participation. While the findings from participants have been discussed, VCSE leaders provided another perspective on accessibility. During the project, barriers such as cost and transport were mitigated

through funding that allowed VCSEs to offer free activities and cover travel costs. However, VCSE leaders also identified the way activities were advertised as another barrier.

One VCSE leader described how a local crafting group was advertised as being for **'elderly people'** – leading to uncertainty about eligibility among potential participants. Similarly, activities explicitly targeting individuals experiencing loneliness or mental health challenges were sometimes associated with stigma. VCSE leaders found that positioning activities as open to all, rather than for specific demographic groups or **'lonely people,'** helped encourage participation.

At St George's theatre, staff identified there was a perception among individuals that theatre activities required prior artistic knowledge or qualifications, presenting a perceived barrier to participation: **"People feel it's not for them – that it's very middle class and you've got to be very academic and know lots about art if you're going to be involved in the theatre."**

By using the Stage Door Café as a base for activities, the organisation provided a neutral and informal space where individuals felt comfortable engaging with staff and learning about opportunities for getting involved in the theatre's groups and activities that could help to reduce loneliness.

These findings highlight the importance of not only utilising local community assets for interventions to reduce loneliness but also ensuring that how these assets are used, including the types of activities offered and the way they are promoted, supports accessibility and inclusivity.

2.2 Human assets

Human assets refer to the skills, experience, and relationships that individuals bring to an organisation. During interviews, VSCE leaders highlighted both VCSE staff and participants/volunteers as key assets to the KYN project.

VCSE Staff

VCSE leaders emphasised the role of people as key community assets, rather than organisations alone. They highlighted how the skills, qualities, and experiences of staff were crucial to the success of engaging individuals at risk of loneliness. In particular, they stressed the importance of trust building and a non-judgemental, person-centred approach.

A person-centred approach was frequently mentioned as a key factor in helping participants feel comfortable and welcome, particularly for new or potential participants. This approach was often in contrast with other services, where individuals had reported sometimes feeling like a burden or just another service user. This style of approach was seen as fundamental to building trusting relationships: **"That starting point of approachability, you can't overstate how important that is... you can have that approach on paper, but you've got to have the people who have got the way of working to be able to [deliver]."**

VCSE staff and volunteers were frequently described as non-judgemental by participants. Experiences engaging with VCSE staff contrasted with staff at statutory services, which were perceived as being judgemental, linked to making participants feel inadequate, personally responsible for their circumstances, or staff appearing unsympathetic or uncaring. This presented a barrier for further engagement with these statutory services.

Reliability was also highlighted as essential for building trust. This applied not only to the consistency and regularity of activities, but also to the presence of key individuals within projects: **"We have to be there every week because that is what some of these people hinge on... If I wasn't there one week, you know, I have a holiday, it's almost like I'm breaking their hearts... I get endless grief."**

Beyond the qualities of individual staff and volunteers, organisations also recognised the value of community members with specific skills and experience. One

24

VCSE leader described working with a long-standing community organiser to set up two groups at the Marina Centre, highlighting how the existing networks and local knowledge of that individual were valuable assets in the development of these activities.

Participants and volunteers

VCSE leaders also identified their own participants and volunteers as valuable community assets. Over the course of the project, some participants took on more active roles within groups, helping to organise activities.

It was recognised that this additional responsibility can lead to groups becoming self-sustaining, with continued funding and support. One VCSE leader reported how participants who had developed strong social ties and confidence took on leadership roles, which will ensure the continuation of groups beyond the KYN project without the need for staff support for as long as volunteers are able to commit to this. Reflecting on this, they said: **"You know you've been a great support if you can actually do yourself out of a job."**

One VCSE leader developed this idea further, describing this process as an **'asset loop'** in which investment in individuals strengthens the wider community. By supporting participants with confidence and personal development, VCSEs create opportunities for them to contribute in return, whether through informal support, volunteering, or even establishing their own groups which become community assets: **"That's an asset loop in many ways, which is – you've invested and worked with that person in a way that's best for them and that's led through a range of things. But ultimately, it's led to them setting up their own group, which in turn then strengthens the community and strengthens the infrastructure within Yarmouth."**

However, it was acknowledged that this progression was not always possible or linear, particularly for individuals facing significant challenges, such as mental health

difficulties or addiction. In these cases, more sustained support is required to enable long-term engagement.

2.3 Social assets

Local networks and partnerships

Local networks between VCSEs were viewed as an important asset in linking participants to activities that can help to strengthen social connections and reduce loneliness and social isolation. While these relationships might have existed in some form before the KYN programme, VCSE leaders described how this project helped to develop new connections and strengthen existing ones. One example of this was a volunteer street fair, funded through KYN, which brought together organisations and helped to increase engagement in a local VCSE network: **"We've got 60-odd people coming to the VCSE group meeting next week, and some of those will be coming because they've experienced [our organisation] and other partners in the area through Know Your Neighbourhood... I think that feels like it's leaving a real legacy from an organisational point of view."**

This strengthening of networks was also reflected in improved collaboration between organisations. Groups that had previously worked in isolation were now more connected, leading to opportunities that had not been available before. By working together, VCSEs were able to share spaces, resources, and audiences, ensuring that activities were accessible to a wider range of people. Many VCSEs hosted their activities across multiple community spaces in the borough, which in turn helped them to reach new participants.

While these venues were built assets, their real value lay in the partnerships and activities they enabled. VCSE leaders emphasised that these social assets were often more important than built assets in enabling long-term community development: **"Yarmouth is not short of buildings, whether or not they're in good use... [this project]**

shows how you can have buildings which can actually go hand in hand with community work. And if you do that, you start to get better value from those buildings. We've got buildings. It's about making sure we've got a continuous and a collective joined-up approach to community development."

Case Study: Partnership between a theatre and an advice organisation

The partnership between a community arts venue and an advice organisation, demonstrated the unexpected benefits of collaboration during the KYN programme and how two organisations that seemed like unlikely partners could bring out positive outcomes for participants.

Through this partnership, the advice organisation was able to use the theatre café as a base for warm space and advice services, bringing people into a welcoming environment. In turn, the theatre was able to engage with people who would not typically access the theatre but had been introduced to the space through the advice organisation's services. This demonstrated the role of shared spaces in building friendships and social connections:

"In the evening, you might have a show happening at the theatre, but during the day you'll have the theatre offering all kinds of activities and warm spaces for community groups and so forth. And actually, you just start to realise that those two things can knit together perfectly."

Beyond social benefits, the partnership also helped people stay engaged in community groups and volunteering, even when facing personal challenges. By having access to advice services, individuals could receive support and advice without having to step away from their community involvement:

"Very few people go through life without difficulties, and you might need some support with money, debts and benefit issues. And if you've got that on hand, you can help that person to continue to volunteer or to continue to be part of that community group, rather than them having to step back and deal with all the crisis that's happening in their life."

Referrals and signposting

Strong networks between VCSEs also created opportunities for signposting participants to activities that supported social connections, as well as other services which support overall wellbeing, such as advice and employment services. This was particularly effective when activities were hosted in community spaces that already attracted local residents, making it easier to introduce them to new opportunities. One VCSE leader described how holding activities in different locations helped them to reach new audiences: **"By working with different locations and different organisations, we've been able to make it more connected... I feel like we are always talking to different organisations and sometimes we're able to link up people just by being in a different space for a week."**

For participants, word of mouth was often the most effective way to learn about activities. This highlighted the need for VCSE staff and volunteers to be well informed about local opportunities so they could direct people to suitable activities that enable social connection.

Another benefit of networks and communication between VCSEs was ensuring that activities were complementary rather than competing. VCSE leaders discussed the importance of mapping existing activities to avoid duplication and ensure that the local offering remained relevant: **"I think also figuring out how can we not duplicate groups and activities that are already happening. So, if you've got a creative writing group happening at the library, there might not be a point in doing one down the road on the same day... it's about figuring out what is there and what areas can be developed on."**

However, VCSE leaders also acknowledged the challenges of competition among the sector, particularly where organisations needed to demonstrate attendance numbers to secure other funding outside of the KYN programme. This could sometimes create tensions: **"I think that's really sad because that organisation knows that we're**

there and it's almost like this whole thing about trying to protect your numbers. It's just not good for them. It's not good for anybody."

Norfolk Community Foundation

NCF helped to enable partnerships among VCSEs in Great Yarmouth. Initially, NCF incentivised partnership funding applications with larger grant amounts available for partnership applications and brought VCSEs together to facilitate this collaboration at the application stage. NCF also enabled partnerships through subsequent networking events during the funded programme.

VCSE leaders described how NCF funding helped to kick start pilot activities, which then developed into longer-term partnerships through KYN. One example was a community music project linking an arts organisation with an advice organisation, which first received support through NCF's Love Norfolk funding programme before expanding through KYN: **"[The project] has maintained momentum and accelerated because of Know Your Neighbourhood, but it was initialised as a concept by Love Norfolk funding... So, things like your funding for Love Norfolk, warm hubs etc, have allowed little pilot activities to take place, which is then allowed for some of these relationships to build."**

NCF's approach to flexible, locally focused funding was seen as an important community asset, allowing VCSEs to test new ideas and develop partnerships that might not otherwise have been possible.

2.4 Working with statutory bodies

Essential services as a point of contact

Through the KYN programme, VCSEs worked with statutory organisations such as the Job Centre, local GPs, and social prescribers to engage individuals at risk of loneliness who might not have actively sought out community groups on their own. Since people are more likely to attend essential appointments even if they are

otherwise socially isolated, these settings provided valuable opportunities for referrals and signposting, connecting people to activities to help reduce loneliness.

One group described how working with social prescribers helped them reach people who might otherwise struggle to engage with activities: **"I had a guy who's a social prescriber who's been regularly coming to one of our groups and introducing people in, meeting his clients there, and it's worked really well."**

Another organisation described receiving referrals from both the local hospital and Job Centre for individuals requiring debt advice. These relationships worked well when there was an alignment in approach and working style: **"I think 'cause, like us, they're accessible… it's a safe space and there's so many different opportunities that they offer, very sort of like similar to the same way of working. I think that's the biggest thing."**

However, VCSE leaders also expressed a desire to work more closely with statutory partners, such as social prescribers, but noted barriers to doing so. The most commonly cited challenge was limited staff capacity to invest time in building and maintaining these relationships. It was also recognised that differences in pace between sectors could cause delays, as VCSEs and statutory bodies often work to different timelines.

A key benefit of the funding programme was that it enabled organisations to increase staff capacity, allowing them to engage more actively in local networks and develop inter-organisational relationships. As one group described, funding allowed them to employ a Community Lead to attend meetings and strengthen local partnerships: **"If it hadn't been for [the funding], I would have had to send my apologies to all those meetings, and we wouldn't have built a relationship."**

VCSE leaders reported positive relationships with the Job Centre, particularly around referrals. This connection opened doors for people who otherwise wouldn't

engage with community groups, as the Job Centre was their only point of contact with services.

However, when VCSEs were hosted within the Job Centre, this sometimes led to tensions: **"What we initially found was the groups of people were there under duress. They had to sign in and sign out. And I think if they didn't attend, they would get a deduction or something… That was making us feel bad. So, then we actually, yeah, stopped going."**

VCSE leaders felt that the Job Centre's approach was often at odds with their own **"no pressure"** ethos, which they believed was more effective but harder to evidence: **"This has been a long tension between public and voluntary organisations working together, and it goes back to the no pressure approach… how can we prove that if you let us work with people in a non-judgmental, non-sanctioned sort of way, you'll get the results?"**

It was suggested that times when there was a stronger VCSE presence in the Job Centre created a more welcoming atmosphere, helping to encourage engagement.

Community partnership or Council

VCSE leaders described positive relationships with Great Yarmouth Borough Council (GYBC), particularly when it came to signposting opportunities and networking. Community Partnership meetings, hosted by GYBC, were seen as important spaces for keeping track of local services and support: **"Community Partnership meetings are something really special… if you have an event, you get a chance to talk about it, and everyone will support and bring as many of the community together."**

A few VCSEs also benefited from practical support from the Council, such as help with finding spaces for activities and linking in with their 'Cultural Connections' volunteering project to reach new participants. It was noted that KYN funding enabled VCSEs to dedicate capacity and resource towards relationship development with local statutory partners, which they otherwise might not be able to do.

One issue identified was that VCSEs and the Council work at different paces, sometimes leading to delays in communication. Despite this, relationships improved over time as staff became more familiar with Council structures and knew who to approach for support. The role of individual councillors was also key. One organisation highlighted a specific councillor who had long-standing experience in community work, describing them as a **"great person to go to for support."**

From the Council's viewpoint, relationships with VCSEs had strengthened significantly over the course of the KYN programme. Three years into the project, the Council reported strong relationships with 12 of the 16 funded organisations, with most of these involving regular communication through network meetings and informal interactions.

A staff member from GYBC's Communities team highlighted how KYN funding had strengthened the local volunteering infrastructure, particularly through the role of a Volunteer Coordinator. Having a dedicated staff member to support individuals into volunteering was seen as more effective than just providing funding, as it allowed for personalised support: **"That has been probably the biggest way to reduce barriers into volunteering... Having that person who people can build a relationship with and can go to, like, 'I might need a bit of support with getting there, will you meet me there?' I think that's been really key."**

From the perspective of GYBC, working relationships between key individuals in the council, NCF, and local VCSEs provided a strong foundation for the KYN programme. These connections, many of which pre-date KYN, have been strengthened through joint initiatives such as the Great Yarmouth Community Investment Fund, which GYBC and NCF have worked on together since 2021.

The council's Communities team has played an important role in maintaining these relationships, with staff bringing a background in community development and recognising the voluntary sector as strategically important in delivering support at a local level. This mutual understanding has created a culture of respect between

statutory and voluntary sector organisations in Great Yarmouth, enabling more effective partnership working.

GYBC reported close working relationships with NCF and local VCSE organisations, allowing for open communication and problem-solving: **"We've always picked up the phone and been like, 'I don't know about this' or 'what's happening with this organisation'... there is a relationship."**

VCSE leaders highlighted how the KYN programme has helped to create a more equitable partnership between the voluntary and public sectors in Great Yarmouth. Because funding was directed at VCSEs rather than statutory organisations, VCSEs were able to take a lead on the formation of partnerships with public sector organisations, helping to level the playing field. Key to this was the involvement of NCF in helping to bring funding opportunities to grassroots community organisations:

"I think that [NCF] had a huge role in keeping some partnerships together actually. And I think I think the work [NCF has] done on this project, albeit with central government funding, has been really helpful to bring public sector partners into that mix alongside voluntary organisations."

This highlights the role of funding distribution and community funding organisations such as NCF in shifting power dynamics and enabling the voluntary sector to lead on partnership development. This approach, along with sustained funding, has helped strengthen ties between VCSEs, NCF, and the council, with all partners recognising the value of working together.

3: Learning from the experiences of individuals in reducing loneliness

In interviews and focus groups, NCF explored the experience and impact on loneliness when participating in a community group.

3.1 Getting involved in a community group

Getting out of the house and taking the first step

VCSE leaders identified a lack of confidence and low self-esteem as the biggest barriers to individuals getting involved in activities. Hesitancy to engage was also common among individuals. One participant described the source of her hesitancy to engage with a group as anxiety: **"One of my biggest fears [was] that I was gonna feel really, really left out because I was the 'new girl.'"** Many contributors experienced anxiety when entering new social spaces, particularly those who had already faced exclusion or mistreatment in the past.

Essential services were seen as key contact points for community connection, as discussed in section 2.4. Although VCSE leaders noted some challenges working with social prescribers (or Life Connectors, in the case of Better Together Norfolk), as outlined in section 2.4, by contrast individuals valued their ongoing support, whether in person or by phone. The duration of this contact varied – some participants engaged quickly with new opportunities, while others needed more time to build rapport and trust with their social prescriber and the group. There was no clear link between communication methods and the speed of engagement. While social prescribers did not always immediately match individuals with the most suitable activities, regular and continued contact was identified as the most beneficial aspect of their support, even for those who worked with multiple social prescribers over time.

Another participant mentioned social media as being an active part of their initial push to try something new, noting a Facebook post from a local VCSE about a Volunteering Fair. Nevertheless, even then the participant required additional support

to attend from a friend: **"I thought, well I don't want to be on my own. So, I asked my best mate whether she wanted to come along with me, see if she wanted to volunteer as well. She was like 'I'm not interested, but I'll come with you anyway.'"** This highlights the importance of the presence of a trusted person when taking the first step to overcoming loneliness and social isolation through participation in a group.

Slow start

Attending the first session was another hurdle that VCSE leaders described as being very challenging for participants: **"For a lot of them literally coming to a two hour drop in on a Friday, it's been a massive step. So, it's a very, very slow process with them."** Feelings of social anxiety were common, often leading participants to want to leave early: **"I sat there thinking I don't know anybody. I don't know whether I want to be here."**

VCSEs shared the person-centred methods they used to support participants to feel confident enough to attend: **"Just meeting one of us beforehand, be it at an event, at a pop-up space, whatever it may be, that's the kind of that little help that they need. To know that there's going to be somebody who is going to be a face they recognise... We're always happy to meet somebody outside or meet somebody a little bit before the group set up."** VCSE leaders continued their support by offering encouragement to participants through regular check-ins via phone call, text, or WhatsApp. Contributors were positive about this support and reported feeling comforted that someone was checking in on them to see if they were well, fostering a sense of social connection.

Participants would often start by spending time at the edge of the room and slowly getting more involved over the course of multiple sessions. Further encouragement from other participants and VCSE leaders was seen as crucial to helping new people feel welcome in the group.

Case study: An individual's experience of a new entering a VCSE group

One individual shared his experience of watching multiple other participants hanging at the edge of the room and slowly moving inwards towards the centre of the room in the session he attended. He recalled when he first came along to a VCSE session and described the overwhelming feeling of social anxiety at the prospect of entering the space.

When he did enter, he was too scared to talk to anyone and almost left before another participant said hello and encouraged him to sit down. This individual now takes pride in being the person to greet and welcome newcomers, with the knowledge of how challenging that first step into the room can be.

3.2 Participating in a community group

Non-judgemental, non-clinical space

There was a consensus among participants that the openness of a setting—meaning its accessibility, welcoming atmosphere, and lack of formal barriers—helped to reduce their hesitation to seek support. VCSE leaders described a comfortable and non-intimidating environment as encouraging individuals to share their challenges and access relevant services.

VCSEs were commonly characterised as effective entry points for individuals experiencing loneliness, as they were seen as welcoming, informal and offered a no-pressure approach. Participants identified that a lack of initial expectations around attendance and not perceiving consequences for non-attendance were crucial for continued engagement and a key aspect of a no-pressure approach.

Individuals contrasted VCSEs' low-pressure approach with other services that were more clinical, structured, or had entry or participation requirements to be eligible to receive services. Unlike highly structured services with eligibility criteria, no-pressure

settings – such as community cafés or informal gatherings – allowed individuals to engage at their own pace. One VCSE leader explained how they do not label themselves as a 'service' or as being for a particular type of person, which they felt attracted more people. Once people were attending, they could signpost to other services and encourage participation in focused group activities if necessary.

Low-pressure environments also enabled casual social interactions, which can be just as valuable as structured activities. Individuals appreciated spaces like the Care & Refresh Café, where they could **"bump into"** others and interact without expectations. Individuals commented that simply sitting together, chatting over tea, or playing a game created meaningful opportunities for connection, reducing loneliness and isolation, and increasing understanding of others' experiences.

Group leaders

For many participants, VCSE leaders provided a vital hook to get people in the door and help to maintain their attendance and participation. They did this using a person-centred approach which encompassed clear communication, flexibility, along with a no-judgement and no-pressure attitude. VCSE leaders identified this approach as key to building trusted relationships:

"We've been very approachable, and we listen to them. I think that's the biggest thing – we've found out what their interests are. We're not just trying to ply things onto them and put them in situations they don't want to be in. We wait until they are comfortable and then, you know, we just have so many options. It could be we've had loads of cups of coffee with them, and it's led nowhere. It doesn't matter – we've given them the time. And I think that's where it's worked."

Another VCSE leader described their personalised approach as being a **'professional friend'** to individuals. They explained that **"you can be professional in the work you do, but you can also be very friendly in the work you do as well. You don't start with the clipboard, you start with the friendly approach, but it's within the**

parameters of what is professional." This approach has helped participants to feel safe, feel more able to share with others, improve their confidence, and enable them to begin to build positive relationships with others.

Sharing peer experiences

Being around people with similar life experiences helped individuals to feel less alone, and **"realise [they are] not alone in suffering."** Additionally, individuals identified that common interest-based groups helped to build social connections locally. An individual noted that where larger sessions took place, subgroups naturally formed around age during breaks from participating or volunteering in whole group activities, but they also came together to share meals and participate in group-wide activities so that **"no one ever feels left out."**

However, communities of interest were not universally regarded as positive. Participants had divided views on what the group should spend their time doing and would participate begrudgingly in activities they did not enjoy to still engage with the group. Similarly, another participant criticised attending a craft group aimed at people with poor mental health as they felt it was not beneficial to engage with people **"talking about their problems"** as they found it **"triggering."** On the other hand, other participants expressed how participating in a VCSE was beneficial to their mental health and the hope that the group brings to them – **"it's kept us alive," "it's like a beacon in a dark time," "I come in on a really bad day and I leave smiling – and that affects other people too… there's a ripple effect on others away from here."**

Community skill-building and sharing

Participants shared and developed a range of skills with others at VCSEs, enabling them to see their potential and get help from others to reach that point. One VCSE ran a creative writing group for a small number of people, who would attend consistently every week. The feedback from the VCSE leader made it clear that this was an important part of their routine and has helped to develop skills: **"It's really helped them**

kind of, not only progress their own writing ability, but also just thinking more creatively."

Individuals also discussed talking and sharing with peers during a range of group sessions and highlighted that this gave them opportunities to empathise and support others who may have experienced similar challenges. For example, one individual said **"I'm actually at the stage where I'm not having a lot of meltdowns anymore. I'm at the stage where if a girl will come in and I can instantly see she's having a meltdown, so I'm here for her… I'm designed for this sort of thing because I've had all the traumas."**

3.3 Volunteering with a community group

Volunteering was identified by participants and VCSEs as a way to reduce loneliness by providing opportunities for increased social interaction.

Participation, 'helping out,' and volunteering

Many individuals interviewed expressed a willingness to **'help out'** at VCSE groups but were hesitant to identify themselves as volunteers or to describe their actions as volunteering, often due to negative associations or misconceptions about what volunteering entails. Some were concerned about the perceived level of commitment that formal volunteering requires. Others saw volunteering as little more than **'unpaid work'** or had a narrow view of it, often limited to stereotypical tasks such as **'sorting clothes in a charity shop.'**

Through the research, NCF identified that individuals' behaviour and role self-identification with VCSE groups typically fell into three overlapping but distinct categories: participating, helping out and volunteering.

'Participating' describes the behaviour of individuals who attend and take part in the sessions or activities but do not contribute beyond their own participation.

'Helping out' describes the behaviour of participants who informally take on tasks or responsibilities that support the running of the activity or organisation, for example, setting up or packing down sessions, organising events, running a shop floor, or interacting with customers. These individuals engage in behaviours that, in practice, mirror those of formal volunteers but do not self-identify as volunteers. For them, 'helping out' implies a more casual, spontaneous, and flexible involvement without the perceived obligations or expectations that the term 'volunteering' carries.

'Volunteering' describes the behaviour of participants who have a more formalised relationship with the organisation, often including agreements, role descriptions, or scheduled commitments. However, the duties performed by volunteers are often identical to those undertaken by those who describe themselves as **'helping out.'**

One recurring barrier to individuals transitioning from participation or helping out into formal volunteering was the expectation of signing a contract or committing to an ongoing schedule. Many felt that formalising their involvement in this way would be restrictive or burdensome. For example, one group member was happy to tidy up at the end of sessions as a way of giving back but was clear that she did not want to commit large portions of her time to a structured role.

For this reason, many participants felt more comfortable describing themselves as 'helping out', allowing them to contribute without the pressure of formal commitments. VCSE organisations recognised these perceptions and often sought to encourage greater involvement by allowing individuals to take on increasing responsibility informally, without explicitly labelling their contributions as volunteering. For example, one VCSE described a participant who was initially reluctant to adopt the label of volunteer but gradually took on additional responsibilities through informal helping out. In contrast, others who did identify as volunteers spoke positively about the structured nature of their roles. In both cases, individuals contributed meaningfully

to the group's shared goals, taking on responsibilities and offering support to others, regardless of how their role was formally defined.

In essence, there is often no material difference between the contributions of someone 'helping out' and someone who is formally volunteering. The distinction lies primarily in individual perceptions, preferences for informality or flexibility, and concerns over the implications of formal volunteering – including, for some, the potential impact on benefit entitlements. These findings align with Voluntary Norfolk's report on *Developing Volunteering in Great Yarmouth*, commissioned at the start of the KYN programme, which similarly highlighted tensions between the informal, flexible nature of helping out and the more structured expectations often associated with volunteering.[12] Despite these concerns, many participants acknowledged the personal satisfaction and communal value of contributing to their communities in whatever way felt comfortable for them.

Building confidence, taking responsibility and giving back

Volunteering – whether it was described as helping out or volunteering – helped individuals to take responsibility for something, such as organising and helping to run events, or running the shop floor and talking to customers, and was strongly linked to improvements in self-esteem and confidence. Being trusted and responsible for something gave volunteers more confidence in their abilities, which was particularly impactful for those who have had trust withheld from them in the past: **"I was always told that I'd never amount to anything, never do anything, never be good enough, and you step in somewhere like this and they just accept you."**

Another reason for volunteering is to give back. VCSE leaders explained how their volunteers often wanted **"to support [others] because they understand and have been in the same situation, and they can understand the situation."** A volunteer adds to

---

[12] See Appendix 2 for a detailed breakdown of these descriptors.

this: **"I knew what it felt like to move to an area and not have any friends and have to gain those connections. So, I felt like my experience was very valuable. They could utilise my experience to then support others… I felt like I was being brought back to life through volunteering, so I wanted to do that for other people."**

Positive engagement – sense of routine, access to activities and friendships

VSCE leaders describe the positive impact on participants' lives that can occur from engaging with activities on a regular basis, particularly when they had been previously inactive or isolated without anything to leave the house for: **"He's been back virtually every week since, and to see the change in him is unbelievable."**

When asked why a volunteer volunteers, he explained: **"Two reasons, really. One, I want to give something back, and two is for me and my mental health, because I've been doing it, at the moment, I've been doing it like three days a week, so it gives me a purpose, so I've got to, like, get up."** Other volunteers also mentioned the reason for their volunteering being their retirement and not wanting to **"wither away"** but instead **"do something useful," "keeping their brain active."** Participants linked this responsibility to routine opportunities to reduce not only the loneliness and social isolation of others, but their own as well.

Another positive outcome from VCSEs were the friendships that were made. Contributors were enthusiastic when discussing the happy atmosphere and friendships they have made in the group, both with fellow participants and the staff and volunteers - **"such a warm feeling to hear the laughing and warmth as you walk in."** They described it as like a family with **"no divide between staff and guests."** These friendships continued outside of group activities. For example, participants from one group went on a trip to London together for a knitting and stitching show.

Volunteers in settings where public interaction was frequent, such as charity shops, noted that the regular customers provided opportunities for social interaction

which they saw as mutually beneficial to both them and the customer in terms of reducing loneliness.

Case Study: Tailored activities to support connecting with others

A 'Monday Clean-up Crew' was created as a result of the positive connections young people made during a theatre production. As a result, a group of eight young people experiencing loneliness were provided with a regular and consistent opportunity for connection and involvement with the VCSE until the next production.

The young people said: **"Oh, what are we going to do, you know, [the project] has ended and we need to see each other weekly."** The VCSE leaders listened to the young people and set up the weekly group, which includes a communal lunch. Young people have reported valuing this opportunity to enjoy time together.

Discussion and recommendations

Reflecting on the key themes from interviews and focus groups, approaches that contributed to reductions in loneliness in the experience of individual participants are highlighted below. Actionable insights are also included below, which could be developed and shared to assist in the development of similar initiatives in the future.

1. Increase opportunities for meaningful social connection

Individuals discussed a range of personal and circumstantial factors that led them to feel lonely or isolated, and often two or more of these factors were described as feeding into each other. Factors such as poverty, life challenges, difficulty trusting others, social anxiety, a lack of confidence, and a lack of mental health support, were described as linked. When multiple factors compounded each other, some individuals described the feeling of being 'stuck' in their houses and finding themselves in a cycle of loneliness and isolation. Certain wards in Great Yarmouth, such as Nelson Ward in the centre, have more deep-rooted poverty. Interviews suggested that poverty and loneliness are linked and can compound to prevent people from building meaningful social connections. Traumatic and significant life events often preceded a period of loneliness and isolation, acting as triggers for people to withdraw from social connections.

To increase opportunities for social connection, the role of individual support workers and trusted individuals was crucial. This included staff from VCSE organisations, healthcare staff, social prescribers, and friends. Once individuals were able to break a negative cycle of loneliness and isolation through the 'hook' of community activities (including hobby and common interest groups, social groups and discussion spaces, or advice and information services), they described embarking on a process of gradual positive development. Regular and reliable opportunities to participate in VCSE sessions can create a sense of routine and help to form positive habits. By participating in positive activities individuals were able to build their self-

esteem, connect with others, and improve their skills. By taking on responsibility through participating, 'helping out,' or volunteering, individuals were able to continue to make more social connections and begin to form positive habits, leading to a cycle of empowerment and meaningful connections with others.

Increased understanding of the causal relationship between indicators of isolation like poverty and trauma, and the felt experience of loneliness as cyclical, can help support workers from VCSE organisations and statutory services to spot signs of loneliness and find opportunities to break the cycle. Those who are already isolated can remain this way with a lack of information about local opportunities for engaging activities and social connection. In these instances, essential services can play a key role in linking individuals to a VCSE or community activities. Social connection breeds more social opportunities, and services such as healthcare or the job centre are often an individual's only contact point to enable access to social spaces during a period of complete isolation.

Recommendations to increase opportunities for meaningful social connection:

- Continue to build the evidence base on the felt experience of loneliness and factors that enable individuals to access opportunities for meaningful social connection, including through VCSE support.

- Direct resources and support to enable better pathways between essential services and VCSEs. Essential services like social prescribers, home visiting support workers, the Job Centre, and healthcare professionals are key touch points to proactively refer individuals to community groups and activities where they can break the cycle of loneliness.

- Continue to fund VCSEs to provide regular and reliable opportunities for individuals to participate in community groups and activities, enabling them to form positive habits and form connections with others.

2. Increase opportunities for integration between cultures to reduce barriers to social connection

Interviews highlighted that divisions between different demographics or perceived groups of people created barriers to social connections, leading people to feel more lonely or isolated. Contributors highlighted that a lack of cross-cultural understanding leads to increased levels of tension and anxiety, dissuading individuals from visiting certain places in Great Yarmouth and further reducing opportunities for social connection.

Improving cultural integration requires targeted efforts to break down language barriers, increase intercultural exchange, and create inclusive social spaces. Expanding access to English language support would help people of minoritised ethnicity to engage more confidently with the wider community, reducing misunderstandings and fostering connections between ethnic groups. It would also enable greater participation in local events, services, and everyday interactions, helping to increase opportunities for social connection.

It was strongly felt by participants that cultural events and exhibitions would encourage interaction between white British and minoritised ethnic residents. These events would provide opportunities to share traditions, build mutual understanding, and challenge misconceptions, reducing social divisions. Showcasing diverse cultures through media, public art, and storytelling initiatives would help counter stereotypes and promote a more inclusive local identity. Highlighting the contributions of minoritised ethnic communities can foster pride and recognition while easing tensions rooted in unfamiliarity.

Children were broadly seen as natural facilitators of integration, especially among parents. Creating more family-oriented activities, such as mixed playgroups and parent-child events. Family-oriented activities would provide informal opportunities for parents and carers from different backgrounds to meet and interact, helping to build long-term social connections.

Recommendations to increase opportunities for integration between cultures to reduce barriers to social connection:

- Increase access to free or affordable English language support for people of minoritised ethnicity to engage more confidently with the wider community.

- Fund and facilitate cultural events and exhibitions to encourage opportunities to learn and share traditions and customs between white British and minoritised ethnic residents.

- Increase access to family-oriented and –friendly activities that provide informal opportunities for parents and carers from different backgrounds to meet and interact.

3. Employ an accessible asset-based approach to reduce barriers to social connection

Cost, transport, activity type, and promotion were all factors that influenced the accessibility of community activities in local spaces. Funding can increase accessibility by removing costs and VCSE leaders can also reduce barriers to participation by hosting activities in neutral or informal spaces and by limiting any criteria for eligibility.

Many participants were happy to take an active role in community groups by 'helping out,' but resisted identifying with the term 'volunteer,' which they perceived as stigmatised. Their willingness to contribute depended not on the activity itself, but on how it was described. Equally, participants and VCSEs highlighted that taking on responsibilities within the community group helped individuals to build confidence, contributing to a cycle of positive development that generally led to making connections with others and being less isolated. Noting that participants often expressed their involvement in terms of 'helping out,' this seems to be a more accessible term than 'volunteering' for individuals in Great Yarmouth, particularly those

who prefer to view their involvement as flexible and informal. Future funding programmes could increase accessibility of volunteering initiatives by using the wording of 'helping out' instead of 'volunteering.'

Contributors identified three types of assets as key to an asset-based approach to community development in Great Yarmouth. These included built, human, and social assets. A range of built assets were utilised by VCSEs, providing familiar and nearby spaces where individuals could access social connection and participate in community activities. The use of locally built assets by VCSEs was described as creating 'bumping spaces,' which contributed positively to providing unstructured and unplanned opportunities for social connection. This is especially valuable given that contributors reported a loss of third spaces and that not everyone feels they fit the criteria for structured activities.

Using existing assets was described as a benefit of many VCSE's approach to delivering activities, but accessibility and marketing of community activities also contributed to how successful activities were. It is especially important to provide affordable and accessible activities during the winter months when there are fewer cultural events, less opportunity to be outside due to weather, and people tend to have less money due to fewer employment options. Most individuals preferred to find out about community activities by word of mouth, and fed back that information about events should not be solely available online or only shared in VCSE circles.

VCSE staff were key community assets who took a person-centred approach to supporting isolated or lonely individuals. Features of this person-centred approach included being a reliable presence and taking a non-judgemental approach to interaction with individuals. When VCSE leaders invested support and resources into building individual's confidence they were more likely to contribute to the wider community through volunteering or in some cases running their own community activities. Hence, participants and volunteers were also community assets and were

described as part of an 'asset loop.' Asset loops are likely to outlive the KYN funding period and are an investment into local volunteering infrastructure.

KYN funding enabled VCSEs to strengthen existing networks and to start new partnerships, providing increased opportunities for collaboration. By working together, VCSEs were able to share spaces, resources, and audiences, ensuring that activities were accessible to a wider range of people. VCSEs emphasised that these social assets were often more important than built assets in enabling long-term community development. Working in partnership and moving between locations helped VCSEs to refer and signpost individuals to other support or community activities. NCF, as a local and flexible funder, was also found to be a community asset that allowed VCSEs to pilot new ideas and develop partnerships that might not otherwise have been possible.

Recommendations to employ an accessible asset-based approach to reduce barriers to social connection:

- Fund a range of free or low-cost activities (such as hobby and common interest groups, social groups and discussion spaces, or advice and information services), cover travel costs, ensuring locations are accessible to remove barriers to participation.

- Future funding programmes to increase accessibility of participation and volunteering initiatives by using the language of 'helping out,' encouraging further involvement from participants who prefer an informal and flexible approach or perceive 'volunteering' as stigmatised.

- Enable VCSEs to take an asset-based approach to community development, including by funding staff and volunteer time. Built, human, and social assets were all employed during the KYN programme and VCSE leaders described people as the most important community assets for supporting individuals to be less lonely.

- Incentivise and actively facilitate networking and a partnership approach to community development, working with local funders and infrastructure organisations to deepen the impact of funding to reduce loneliness.

4. Invest in people and relationships to increase participation and reduce loneliness

The KYN programme has delivered impactful results through multi-year funding, which is vital to support individuals to engage, particularly as individuals described the process of building up the confidence to access a VCSE group as taking up to six months. Many VCSE leaders expressed the benefits of building connections and collaborations to bolster Great Yarmouth's volunteering infrastructure and their ability to support individuals in a joined-up way during KYN. Developing such a collaborative approach takes time and VCSE leaders expressed concerns about losing assets like spaces, people, and networks when the funded programme ends.

VCSE leaders described the impact of short-term funding cycles on their support for individuals, saying they try to avoid individuals being bounced between services, but they are limited when funding ends and they need to build new structures of support. Future funding programmes should seek to bolster and build on existing volunteering infrastructure, thus helping to avoid 'short term funding fatigue' for individuals and VCSE organisations. Long term funding is more likely to contribute to the development and sustainability of assets and to the creation of 'asset loops.'

Investment in staff members and cross-sector relationships was shown to enable funding to have a deeper impact. This research showed that passionate individuals in VCSEs, NCF, and statutory services collaborated through regular communication to build respectful relationships and work together, which led to a greater number of resources and support available for individuals to build connections. Local statutory

bodies and funders played a networking role in bringing VCSEs together and facilitating partnership working.

The efficacy of the KYN programme in reducing loneliness on the ground was driven by people such as VCSE leaders, volunteer coordinators, and participants themselves. Through sustained funding, people were able to dedicate time and attention to support individuals with a personalised approach that led to thoughtful connections and individuals reporting that they felt seen and heard.

Investing in people through dedicated roles like a volunteer coordinator and VCSE leaders was shown to be one of the most powerful assets for supporting individuals to feel less isolated and lonely. Likewise, building on existing cross-sector relationships creates a stronger infrastructure for community participation and volunteering and enables funding to go further.

Recommendations to invest in people and relationships to increase participation and reduce loneliness:

- Focus on providing multi-year funding opportunities for sustained impact. Contributors to this research reported that long-term investment helped individuals build confidence, relationships, and skills over time, fostering positive development and the creation of assets.

- Fund inter-sector relationships and provide opportunities for networking and relationship-building between VCSEs, local statutory bodies, and local funders to provide more coordinated community engagement. Invest funding in people who are experienced in community development and take a person-centred and non-judgemental approach to supporting individuals.

Conclusion

In this place-based research, we used a range of methods to conduct an in-depth qualitative review of the challenges individuals in Great Yarmouth experience to making social connections and the asset-based approach of VCSEs to support lonely individuals.

The findings from this research highlight the complexity of loneliness and the need for a multifaceted, asset-based approach to fostering community connections in Great Yarmouth. While structural challenges such as deprivation, seasonal instability, and declining third spaces contribute to loneliness and isolation, the success of the KYN programme demonstrates that trusted relationships, inclusive activities, and targeted interventions can help individuals overcome barriers to social connection.

Ultimately, reducing loneliness requires both structural investment and grassroots action. By supporting long-term, person-centred initiatives, and strengthening cross-sector collaboration, individuals can build sustainable pathways to inclusion and meaningful social connection.

Additional Resources

Appendix 1 – List of participating VCSE organisations

Organisation	Description
DIAL	DIAL is charity offering financial advice and support, responding to 10,000 enquiries annually, and promoting the Disability Confident scheme while expanding access through a volunteer group.
Feathers Futures CIO	A women's charity in Great Yarmouth that provides a supportive space and various services to help women build confidence, resilience, and friendships while reducing isolation and improving well-being.
GYROS	GYROS is a charity that supports vulnerable migrants in Norfolk and Suffolk by providing free information, advice, guidance, and advocacy on various issues, including immigration, housing, and employment
MensCraft	MensCraft is a charity that supports men facing various life challenges by offering one-to-one support and group activities to improve their mental and physical health, relationships, and overall well-being.
ProCommunity CIC	ProCommunity CIC empowers neighbourhoods by leveraging existing strengths to develop local activities that foster community involvement, improve well-being, and reduce isolation, thereby promoting social cohesion and inclusivity.
St George's Theatre	St. George's Theatre in Great Yarmouth, housed in a converted Grade I listed chapel, offers year-round

	productions, volunteering opportunities, and a community space for networking and collaboration.
St Mary Magdalene PCC (Gorleston)	St Mary Magdalene PCC is a church that serves its community through various weekly activities, support services, and annual events, including hot lunches, youth clubs, foodbanks, and housing support for the homeless.
The Shoebox Enterprises CIC	Shoebox Enterprises CIC is a social enterprise that focuses on building resilient communities through various community-based projects, fostering meaningful connections, and empowering local people in Great Yarmouth and Norwich.
Wastesmiths CIC	Wastesmiths is a social enterprise focused on transforming relationships with materials through local regenerative economies, offering events, education, and interventions in repair, recycling, and community mobilisation.

Appendix 2 – Community Participation: Perceptions of Participating, Volunteering and Helping Out

Comparison table created by NCF outlining language used by participants to describe perceptions of 'participating,' 'helping out,' and 'volunteering' in a community group.			
	Dimensions		
Category/ Type	**Self-perception of role**	**Motivation**	**Other considerations**
Participating	'I'm just taking part in an activity'	• Getting help/support; something to do; socially prescribed.	• Making social connections. • Anxiety or lack of confidence; can be intimidating at first. • Lack of trust in others.
Helping out	'I'm not a volunteer, I'm just pitching in'	• Desire to contribute to a shared goal or community; sense of responsibility; appreciation for one's contribution. • Skill-building or work-readiness.	• Preference for informal roles perceived as lower-pressure or more flexible. • Involves the same activities as volunteering, without formal agreement. • Reluctance to be labelled a 'volunteer' due to perceived stigma or expectations of formality/unpaid labour. • Hesitance to commit to regular involvement.
Volunteering	'I see myself as part of the team'.	• Desire to contribute to a shared goal or community; sense of responsibility; appreciation for one's contribution. • Skill-building or work-readiness.	• Concerns about how volunteering may affect benefits or financial status. • Pressure of formal responsibilities or expectations.
This table compares how Great Yarmouth residents perceive and engage with community roles. The distinctions between 'helping out' and 'volunteering' are based on the language used by interviewees and how they perceive themselves in community roles, rather than to suggest differences in the value of their contribution.			

Appendix 3 – Built and Natural assets in Great Yarmouth

Organisation/Location	Description
Care and Refresh Café (St George's Theatre)	Café located at St George's Theatre, serving as a community meeting space.
Freshly Greated	Arts initiative working in the most socio-economically deprived areas of Great Yarmouth and Gorleston.
Gorleston Pavilion Theatre (Gorleston)	Open year-round, hosting a full programme of shows and community activities.
Gorleston	A coastal town in Norfolk, UK, located south of Great Yarmouth.
Great Yarmouth Pleasure Beach (Great Yarmouth)	An amusement park situated along the seafront.
Great Yarmouth	A historic seaside town in Norfolk, UK.
Marina Centre (Great Yarmouth)	A modern leisure facility offering a range of activities and amenities.
PrimeYarc (Great Yarmouth)	A creative hub and gallery space supporting local artists and hosting exhibitions, events, and activities.
St. George's Theatre & Stage Door Café (Great Yarmouth)	Theatre offering year-round entertainment and arts activities. The adjacent café provides refreshments and serves as a space for community groups.
St. Mary Magdalene Church (Gorleston)	The parish church for the Magdalen Estate in Gorleston, acting as a local social hub.
The Beach (Great Yarmouth)	A sandy beach next to the seafront.
The Rows (Great Yarmouth)	A series of narrow, historic alleyways between the town centre and the quayside.
The Seafront (Great Yarmouth)	Also called *The Golden Mile* or *Marine Parade*, featuring a promenade, cycle track, road, amusement arcades, and tourist attractions.
Time and Tide Museum & Silver Darlings Café (Great Yarmouth)	Local history museum with adjoining community café.

References and Bibliography

Age UK (2024) 'You are not alone in feeling lonely: Loneliness in later life.' Retrieved from: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/siteassets/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/you-are-not-alone-in-feeling-lonely.pdf (Last accessed: 03.06.2025)

Department for Culture, Media & Sport (2025) 'Research about connecting with others via the local physical and social environment.' Retrieved from: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-about-connecting-with-others-via-the-local-physical-and-social-environment/research-about-connecting-with-others-via-the-local-physical-and-social-environment (Last accessed: 26.02.2025)

Flora, Cornelia and Arnold, Nancy (2012) 'Community Development.' Retrieved from: https://www.memphis.edu/ess/module4/page4.php#:~:text=Built%20assets%20refer%20to%20anything,facilities%2C%20transportation%20systems%2C%20etc. (Last accessed: 26.02.2025)

Norfolk County Council (Dec 2024) 'Norfolk JSNA Social Isolation and Loneliness.' Retrieved from: https://www.norfolkinsight.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Norfolk_JSNA_Social_Isolation_and_Loneliness.pdf (Last accessed: 26.02.2025)

Office for National Statistics (ONS). (n.d.). Local statistics for Great Yarmouth. Retrieved from https://explore-local-statistics.beta.ons.gov.uk/areas/E07000145-great-yarmouth/indicators. (Last accessed: 26.02.2025)

Office for National Statistics (ONS). (n.d.). *Census area changes: Great Yarmouth*. Retrieved from https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000145/. (Last accessed: 26.02.2025)

The Princes Trust (2024) The Princes' Trust NatWest Youth Index 2024, p.8-9. Retrieved from https://assets.ctfassets.net/qq0roodynp09/1dwzhtDnn0c2fMyH7AGZTC/d7466a75712c8333545d79ebb6e0880e/DSN6204_Princes_Trust_Youth_Index_2024_Final.pdf. (Last accessed 27.02.2025.

Voluntary Norfolk (2023) Developing Volunteering in Great Yarmouth: Building Pride and Place. Retrieved from: https://www.voluntarynorfolk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Volunteering-in-GY.pdf. (Last accessed 27.02.2025)