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Durham Community Infrastructure Project

Final Evaluation Report

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Durham County Council

Funded by UK Government

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Executive Summary

The Durham Community Infrastructure Project aimed to enhance resilience, sustainability and viability in rural and disadvantaged communities across the county by providing capital and revenue grants to community organisations. It was funded by UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), commenced in October 2024 and concluded in March 2025. This is the final evaluation report.

County Durham faces significant socio-economic challenges, including high deprivation, low job density, health inequalities, and poor digital connectivity. In response, County Durham's strategic vision and UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) investment plan prioritise strengthening community infrastructure to address these disparities, foster inclusion, and support sustainable economic growth, ensuring that all residents have the opportunity to prosper.

Community infrastructure, encompassing the facilities, services and spaces that support local wellbeing, cohesion and economic outcomes, is vital for thriving communities. Nationally, over the past decade community infrastructure has seen chronic underinvestment leading to reduced social capital, weaker community engagement and entrenched inequalities. Such indicators highlight the pressing need for targeted investment in community infrastructure which the this project sought to address.

The project was delivered through a partnership framework, led by Durham County Council's Community Economic Development team and drawing on the expert input of other council services and delivery partners. This included Durham Community Action, Digital Durham and Rural Design Centre. The partnership aimed work collaboratively with communities to identify infrastructure needs and provide targeted financial support to implement solutions.

The evaluation found that the project was effectively managed and delivered despite the tight timeframes and the challenges of delivering as part of a diverse partnership of organisations. The systems and processes that were established to support the delivery of the project, including the layers of governance, communication mechanisms between partners and grant appraisal processes, took some time to bed in, but ultimately worked well. The main challenge to delivery was as a result of the challenging timeframes. In particular, this affected the level and depth of codesign work carried out with communities. The initial intention to codesign infrastructure needs at a community level was difficult to achieve in the timeframes, and instead, coproduction work focused on individual community organisations.

Despite this, the project performed well and exceeded almost all output and outcome targets. In total, the project supported 48 community organisations (exceeding the initial target of 25) with the total amount of grant funding paid exceeding £5 million. It created 156 volunteering opportunities, reached almost 43,000 users of community

facilities and supported over 130 local events or activities.

These outputs led to a range of observable outcomes as summarised below:

- Capital improvements, including maintenance and digital upgrades, helped keep community hubs open and functional, especially during colder months, and has helped to modernise their facilities and service delivery.
- Energy efficiency works and infrastructure upgrades are expected to boost long-term financial sustainability and environmental performance, reducing cost pressures that have significantly impacted community organisations in recent years.
- Funded activities contributed to stronger operational capacity through upskilling volunteers, expanding services, and attracting new income through hires, partnerships, and grant funding.
- Early signs indicate that improved facilities and services are enhancing residents' access to support, improving wellbeing, and increasing community engagement and pride in local spaces.

Several deep dive case studies illustrating the impacts of the investment in five communities were carried out (see appendices). Whilst these case studies, alongside the other evaluation activity, do show strong impacts resulting from the investments so far, it is anticipated that the project's impacts will continue to accrue well into the future and beyond the timeframe for the evaluation.

The evaluation identified the following lessons learned that should inform the design and delivery of future community infrastructure projects.

Lesson 1: The role of a central coordination point, such as the Communities and Place Officer, is vital for the smooth delivery of complex partnership projects.

Lesson 2: Leveraging the collective knowledge and data held by partner organisations may have enhanced the identification of communities to target for the project.

Lesson 3: Early and comprehensive information sharing with community hubs about the full range of support available through the partnership is important for effective engagement.

Lesson 4: Realistic timelines and resource allocation are essential for all project phases, particularly for community engagement and co-design.

Lesson 5: Capital funding for essential maintenance and upgrades addresses critical needs for the sustainability of community infrastructure.

Lesson 6: Investment in digital infrastructure and volunteer development significantly enhances the capacity and relevance of community hubs.

Lesson 7: While immediate impacts are evident, long-term outcomes on communities require sustained support and may take time to fully materialise.