

# Facing the Future



Applying the lessons of the  
community response to COVID-19  
in Hastings and St Leonards



A report by the  
**Hastings Community Hub**  
in association with  
**Hastings Voluntary Action**



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UK Government

# INTRODUCTION

**The Hastings COVID-19 Community Hub (the Hub) brought together organisations from the voluntary and public sectors to share experiences, combine efforts and develop new ways of supporting local people through the pandemic and lockdowns.**

At over 100 meetings known as check in sessions we witnessed what Dickens described as the “best of times and the worst of times”.

As local residents watched their incomes squeezed and the services and projects they relied on becoming more fragile, volunteers and communities stepped up to meet these unprecedented challenges.

As well as co-ordinating an effective response Hub members embarked on a process to capture the learning and trends from their work. A successful bid to the government’s Community Renewal Fund (CRF) provided some resources to act on some of the themes which have been identified.

This report describes what we learned during this remarkable period together with the wider implications for cross sector collaboration in Hastings.

We hope that this document provides a catalyst for discussion so that future challenges can be approached effectively.

The UK Community Renewal Fund is a UK Government programme for 2021/22. This aims to support people and communities most in need across the UK to pilot programmes and new approaches to prepare for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. It invests in skills, community and place, local business, and supporting people into employment.

For more information, visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-community-renewal-fund-prospectus>

Hastings Voluntary Action (HVA) were successful in bringing some CRF funding to Hastings. In addition to this report, they have rolled out an ambitious programme which has involved the largest study into local volunteering, knowledge exchange programmes, training and the development of an online platform for information sharing to make local referrals work more effectively for local people.



The work of the Hub was based around several key principles:

### **ALIGNMENT**

When efforts are linked during emergencies then outcomes are better. The Hub provided an anchor point – connecting projects, activities, resources and people.

### **ASSET-BASED APPROACH**

Communities can identify and mobilise existing assets themselves. The Hub's activities in Hastings were led and facilitated by the community and an active network of Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations. That made us different.

### **SOCIAL CAPITAL**

Using trusted organisations and individuals as well as local neighbourhood networks ensured that our work reached a broad audience and could be adjusted to fit the circumstances.

### **OPEN SOURCE INTELLIGENCE**

The sharing of data and trends at regular meetings was critical as it allowed us to respond quickly. As part of our commitment to learning, we used existing data and commissioned research to identify problems and develop solutions.

### **PROCESS ABOVE STRUCTURE**

The Hub is an open collective of voices that worked together to ensure that services were available during a time of crisis. Our membership changed over time but we could always deploy a wide range of services and solutions to meet local need.

### **FAST RESPONSE**

Innovative and collaborative working led to swift and successful funding campaigns which raised around £250,000 to support local activity.

**This experience taught us much about how partnership and service delivery could work in future. After two years on the frontline, the Hastings COVID-19 Community Hub is uniquely placed to report on what life is like for our poorest residents.**

**It is in this spirit that the Facing the future: applying the lessons of the community response to COVID-19 in Hastings and St Leonards is publishing 10 key trends which could form the basis for how charities can work together with policy makers, service planners and commissioning agencies.**

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# Poverty is worsening

Hastings residents are poorer than the UK average. The lasting impacts of the financial crisis and a decade of austerity followed by the COVID-19 pandemic have left many in our community struggling to meet their basic needs. And this is only the tip of the poverty iceberg.



Darren Cool

## HASTINGS IN NUMBERS

# 13th

**The position of Hastings on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)** which ranks 326 local authority areas around the country. This has worsened from 20th in 2015. (East Sussex in Figures)

# 25.9%

**Children living in low income families** compared with 18.5% for England and 14.2% for the region.

# 8.3%

**People receiving disability benefits** against 5.8% nationally and 4.7% regionally in August 2021. (European Structural and Investment Fund, ESIF)

# 32.9%

**People receiving benefits** compared to 27.6% nationally and 18.2% regionally in November 2021. (ESIF)

# £5 million

Amount won by Hastings Advice and Representation Service (HARC) in **un-obtained, enhanced or reinstated benefits** in 2019/2020. They won **94%** of client benefit cases showing the widespread failure to get money to the poorest people.

# 68%

**Increase in the amount of food** provided by **Hastings Sustainable Food Network** in the two years ending 31 March 2022 compared to the previous two years. This is up from 144,436 kgs to **242,957 kgs**.

# 57,673

**The amount of food vouchers** that were given out the **Emergency Food Network** in the two years ending 31 March 2022 compared to 25,359 vouchers in the previous two years.

The most vulnerable in our community are getting poorer. Soaring energy prices, cuts to Universal Credit and tax hikes mean the cost of living is now outstripping incomes.

The war in Ukraine and its devastating impact on the world economy has only reinforced the shocks local people were already feeling and the rapidly emerging cost of living agenda will dominate the months and years ahead.

Foodbanks are on the front line feeding hungry families but face unprecedented demand which is straining their limited resources.

The need for housing advice diminished over the pandemic due to the temporary protections given by the government to tenants but is expected to increase again along with pressure on social housing.





## CITIZENS ADVICE 1066 IN NUMBERS

During the peak pandemic period of 1st April 2020 to 23rd March 2022  
Citizens Advice 1066 advised  
the following number of people  
compared to the previous 2 years:

### Benefits/tax credit

**10,104**  
**+16%**

### Food voucher/budgeting

**5,617**  
**+18.5%**

### Utilities

**8,786**  
**+26%**

## CASE STUDY

### Citizens Advice 1066 helps Hastings man keep his home

When Mr W was referred to Citizens Advice 1066 (CAB) by Hastings Job Centre Plus he was in debt and struggling to pay his rent after leaving his job due to a mental health breakdown. Universal Credit didn't cover the full amount he owed every month and he was also behind on his council tax payments. Mr W's advisor at CAB first made sure he was receiving mental health support. Then, the advisor gave him a food voucher and helped him complete a discretionary housing payment application to top up his housing allowance.

CAB helped Mr W get a council tax reduction and provided him with information about financial support in reducing household bills. Next for Mr W will be a meeting with his advisor about the rent arrears and negotiating a payment plan with his landlord, supported by CAB's advice.

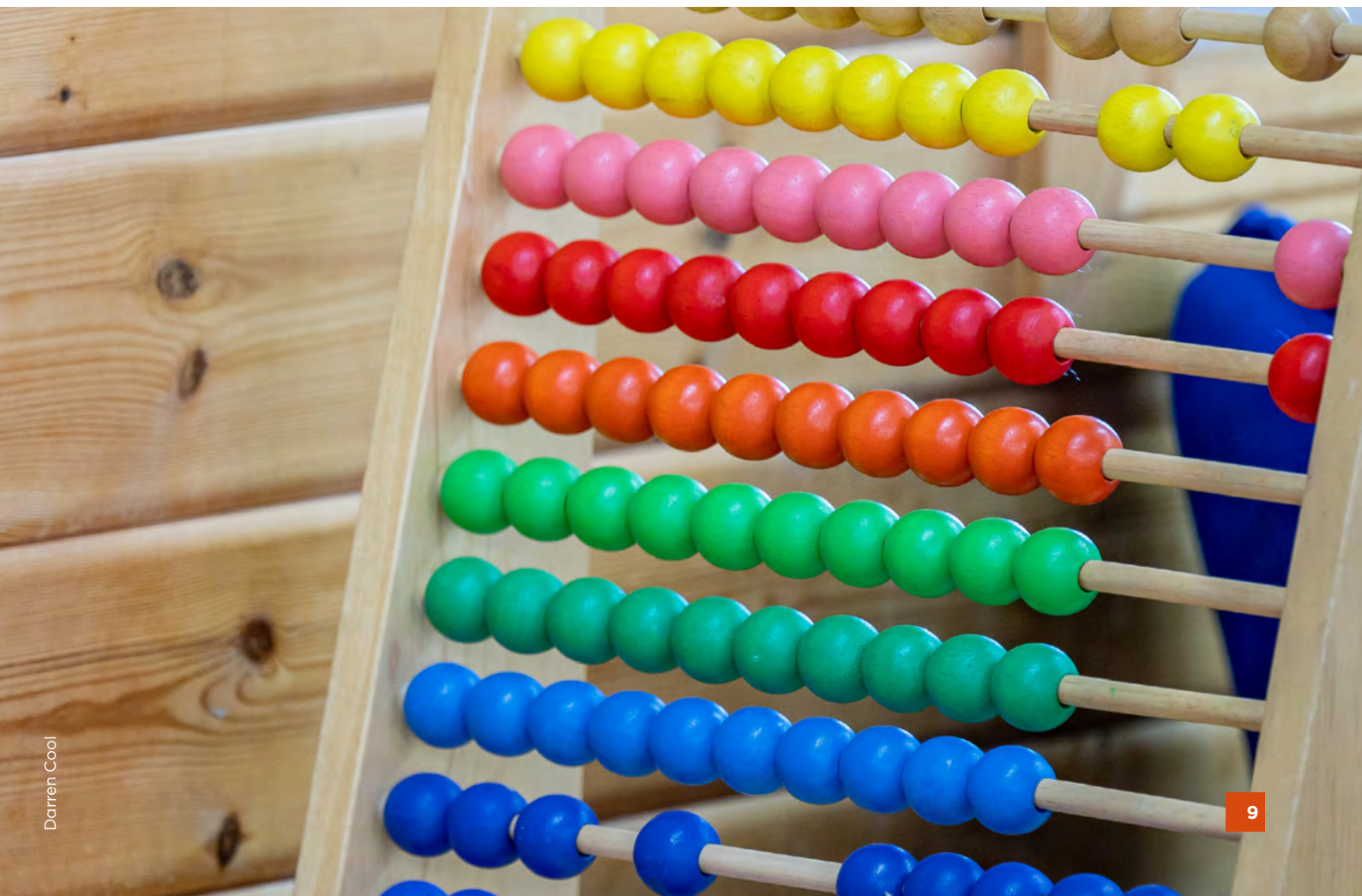
#### **OUTCOME**

**Citizens Advice 1066 helped Mr W to stay in his home and manage his budget during a difficult period.**



# Core funding will be squeezed

Millions invested for decades in regeneration has failed to touch the lives of those living in Hastings' poorest communities. Meanwhile, funding for core local services remains unpredictable and short term.



Deprivation is particularly acute on our outlying housing estates where money from government programmes such as the Shared Prosperity Fund has failed to trickle down to those who need it most. Severe funding pressure on county council children's and adult services has only made the situation worse. That means the poorest residents in our town have turned to charities at the same time the voluntary sector is facing its own funding squeeze.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been severe. Charity shops were forced to close and traditional ways of fundraising had to stop or change. An analysis by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) into the challenges facing the third sector in East Sussex found that charities could provide strong and responsive action but had huge difficulties in accessing sustainable funds.

With no new money in the pipeline and demand increasing, collaborative working between councils, the NHS and the third sector is even more essential if the sector is to continue helping the most vulnerable in our community.

**“Charities are currently experiencing increased demand due to the impact of the coronavirus. Many of these organisations are now working on the front line in the fight against the virus, complementing the work of the NHS. These organisations include hospices and care homes looking after the elderly and shielded, charities supporting volunteers in health services, community organisations arranging for food provision to those in poverty, mental health and domestic violence charities.**

**If these organisations close their doors or furlough staff, the result would be increased pressure on the NHS and other public services. The research material outlines that the demand on the VCS will continue to increase whilst resources will be limited. With pressure falling back to primary care, there is increased focus on partnership working and integrated care models so that local councils, the NHS, VCS and other partners can cope with the pressures effectively.”**

(The National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2020)

Innovation, both in how charities fundraise and reach people, will be crucial. Graduates with insight into technology and social platforms will be vital to help drive this change forward.

## FUNDING SQUEEZE IN NUMBERS

# £2.174 million

Reserves used to **balance Hastings Borough Council's budget.**

# 91%

Those surveyed who thought the future for local voluntary groups was either **critical or getting worse.**<sup>1</sup>

# 60%

Number of charities that **lost income** in 2021. **62%** believed their financial viability was **under threat** in the next year. **1%** reported a threat to their survival.<sup>2</sup>

# 54%

Charities **not expecting** to return to pre-pandemic levels of **fundraising** in 2021.<sup>3</sup>

# 46%

Charities using **cash reserves** to cope with the impact of the pandemic. **44%** had cash reserves for **six months.** **9%** had **no cash reserves** at all.<sup>4</sup>

1. Hastings Voluntary Action Members Survey, HVA 2022.

2. Hastings Voluntary Action Members Survey, HVA 2022.

3. Research by PBE in partnership with the Charity Finance Group and the Chartered Institute of Fundraising.

4. Research by NCVO.

# Greater need but fewer services

Funding cuts to the charity sector and slashed services have come at the same time as more people with complex needs are looking for help.



It was up to the third sector to step in and save the much-loved **Isabel Blackman Centre** which provided services to older people in Hastings Old Town and had been closed down by East Sussex County Council. The centre was a major provider for those facing dementia and other challenges. It is now run as an independent community asset.

However **Pinehill**, an adult day care centre specialising in supporting people with dementia, could not be saved and the site was redeveloped.

The borough council no longer receives government funding to support neighbourhood and community developments. Although this capacity was eroded some years ago, the ability to plan and co-ordinate alongside communities and to have accurate local intelligence has been much reduced.

Hastings residents facing fuel poverty, safeguarding issues and debt are increasingly turning to charities for help. That means the voluntary sector is facing a tidal wave of hard-to-resolve cases, particularly mental health issues caused by the pandemic and the lockdowns.

**The Fellowship of St Nicholas (FSN)**, which supports people in need, in poverty or who are living in disadvantage, has seen referrals rise since the pandemic. The cases are complex which has forced staff to liaise with an ever wider range of services. Staff say they need more training and welfare support and are concerned that intervening with someone with deep-rooted mental health issues could be harmful without clinically-trained professionals on hand.

Clearly, a cross-sector approach is required to manage these multifaceted needs.



## CASE STUDY

### Education Futures Trust helps vulnerable family



The Education Futures Trust (EFT) is among many local charities facing a wave of complex cases.

Recently, an EFT keyworker helped a woman and her two children who were suffering physical and emotional domestic abuse. The keyworker reported the case to East Sussex County Council and the police, then went to the police station with the woman.

Alternative housing was found for the family and EFT contacted children's services for additional support.

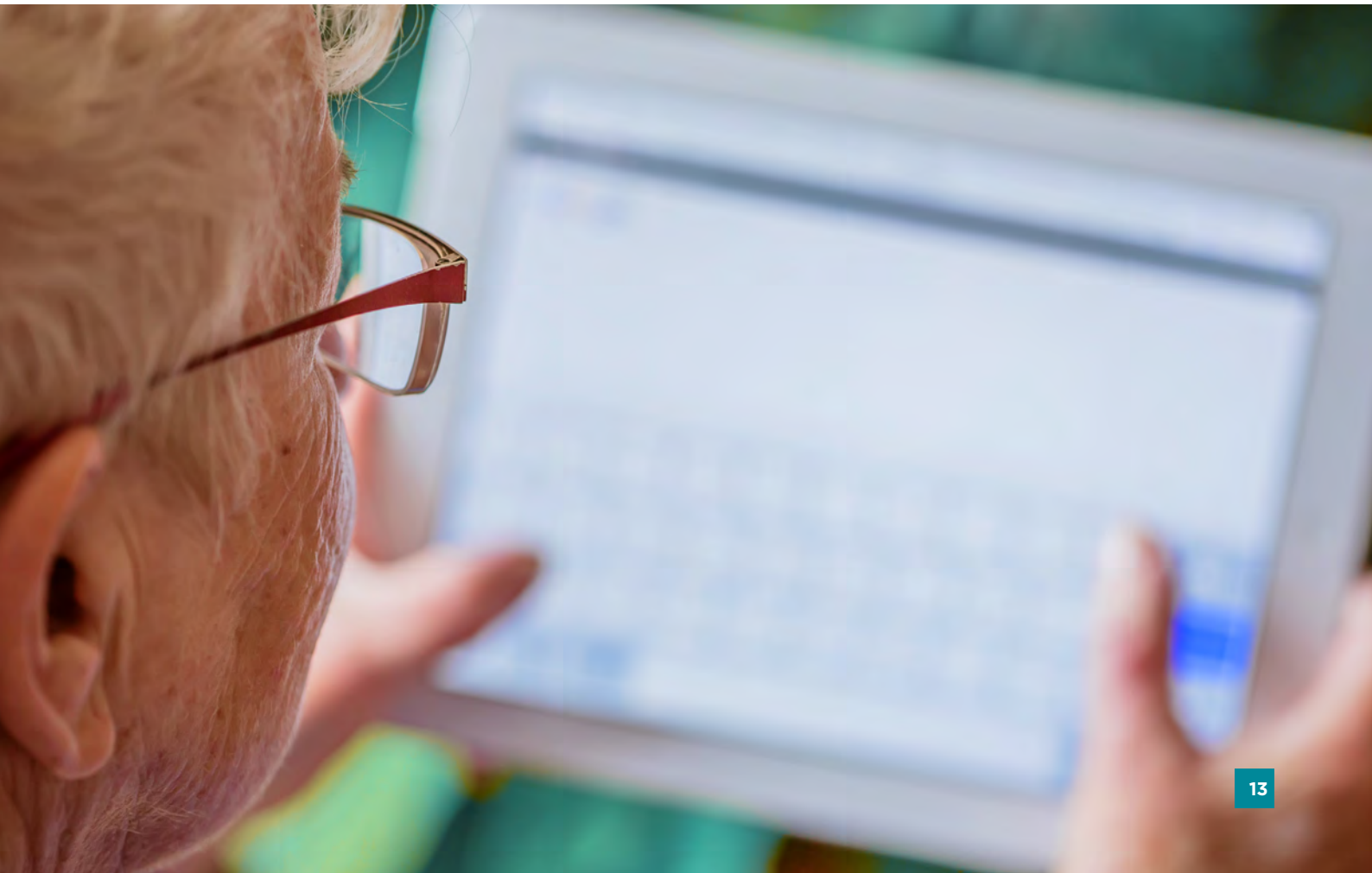
The case was organisationally and emotionally draining, but EFT is proud of the contribution it is making to the safety and wellbeing of families in East Sussex.

#### OUTCOME

**A vulnerable Hastings family has been safely housed and is being supported by law enforcement, third sector staff and partners.**

# Online-only services creating a digital divide

Five years into the government's Digital by Default programme, engaging with services at the local level is usually done online.



Whether it is completing a benefit form or making a doctor's appointment there are a range of online initiatives including **My Hastings** and the county council's **Citizens Digital** project.

**For those with the skills, equipment and resources this is a convenient timesaver. In Hastings, however, there is a present and increasing digital divide creating a two-tier system where the most marginalised face the greatest barriers to accessing services.**

Nationally, low-income households are four times more likely to be digitally excluded and the over 65s eight times more likely. (Good Things Foundation)

Meanwhile, many voluntary organisations are uncertain about the obligations they have in the digital age and receiving support on issues around data protection and GDPR was identified as a priority in HVA's membership survey. As part of its **Community Renewal Fund** learning programme, HVA, in partnership with the advice sector, is exploring ways in which information sharing – with the full support of the user – can be facilitated so that collaboration and referrals between organisations happen effectively.

## THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN NUMBERS

# 2 million

The number of people affected by data poverty, meaning they can't afford to access the internet.

# 10 million

The number of people who lack the basic skills to use the internet.<sup>5</sup>

# 65%

The percentage of people who video called for the first time during the pandemic.

5. The Good Things Foundation/Lloyds Bank.

## Seaview

Seaview helps marginalised people with addiction problems, mental health issues, ex-and at-risk offenders and rough sleepers achieve personal growth and fulfilment. Staff at Seaview are working in partnership with the **Good Things Foundation**, an organisation aiming to ensure everyone benefits from digital, to help those with mental health issues access services digitally. This includes sourcing low cost and free devices for people on benefits along with coaching to enable their effective use.



## CASE STUDY

Seaview is also part of an initiative facilitated by HVA bringing together service delivery organisations who receive large grants from the Hastings-based **Foreshore Trust** charity. Known as the **Golden Thread** this collaboration strengthens the ability of local organisations to meet the needs of service users with mental health issues. So far a £40,000 commission is acting on its findings and a partnership bid to the NHS Mental Health Transformation Fund has been made

Access to equipment and the internet is only one of the issues faced by service users when accessing services online. Dyslexia and other learning difficulties present very significant barriers. Those with dyslexia often find using touch screens and dictating information are particularly helpful.

Seaview and HCN are sourcing low cost and free devices for people on benefits via **Tech Resort**.

# Affordable and suitable premises are harder to find

Hastings is a town on the move. As it regenerates, however, the gap between soaring commercial rents and the amount the local voluntary community can afford to pay for space is growing ever wider.



## THE SPACE CRISIS IN NUMBERS

# 8%

The percentage of third sector organisations in the borough operating from premises which were built or adapted to meet their specific needs or purpose.

*Accommodation Needs of the Voluntary Sector, report by Hastings Borough Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee.*

Central St Leonards, where there is a complex social mix and high levels of need, is particularly vulnerable to rising property prices and inward migration from more affluent areas. Charities can't afford the rising rents which has contributed to a lack of community-based delivery and access points for those who most need our services. The area's mainly Victorian building stock meant heating, lighting and maintenance costs were already extremely high. With soaring energy costs, there will be even greater challenges ahead.

**The Hub** used a variety of community based, commercial and public sector owned buildings to help deliver and promote the vaccine programme. However, much of the space in Hastings (particularly the town centre) and central St Leonards where the need is greatest isn't suitable to deliver health activities safely, teach people cooking and other skills or satisfy access requirements.

New and innovative ways of working such as the pop up COVID-19 vaccine clinic at the **Hastings Town Hall** are one solution to the space crisis. The Town Hall clinic opened to engage with the deprived population of the town centre and a second health promotion project for the building is currently being developed through **Hastings Emergency Action Resilience Team (HEART)** and **NHS Sussex**.





## Central Hall

Central Hall is a building leased from the borough council by HVA providing flexible and affordable space for local groups. During the pandemic the space was offered to local support organisations who were unable to make their premises COVID safe. The venues also hosted the **LINKS** project bringing services directly to asylum seekers and refugees and offered direct support during period when the refugees began to arrive in the UK.



## Sussex Spaces

Hastings is a hilly town with three separate centres and inland urban development, making effective space planning difficult. HVA is participating in the **East Sussex Spaces** project which is looking at more effective ways of using public and community space in our spread-out community. It is clear that the innovative use of buildings, such as partners sharing spaces that allow clients to access various services under one roof, can lead to service improvement, staff productivity, sustainable work and support economic recovery.

It is a public sector led approach to maximising the use of buildings and other assets in each locality. As part of that, the community sector is accepted as having a valuable role as both building users and the providers of space, alongside other partners.

## Hastings Voluntary Action

HVA is working to bring a one-time community hub at Silchester Mews back to life. The Mews once housed a community energy project and provided a variety of local services but is now empty and in need of major refurbishment. HVA has successfully submitted an expression of interest to the **Community Ownership Fund** to reopen the building with the support of partners in health and local authorities. The next stage will be project design together with partners and the community before full submission of the final bid.

## Hastings Commons

Hastings Commons is a group of organisations working together to create affordable, inclusive spaces, homes and workplaces within central Hastings.

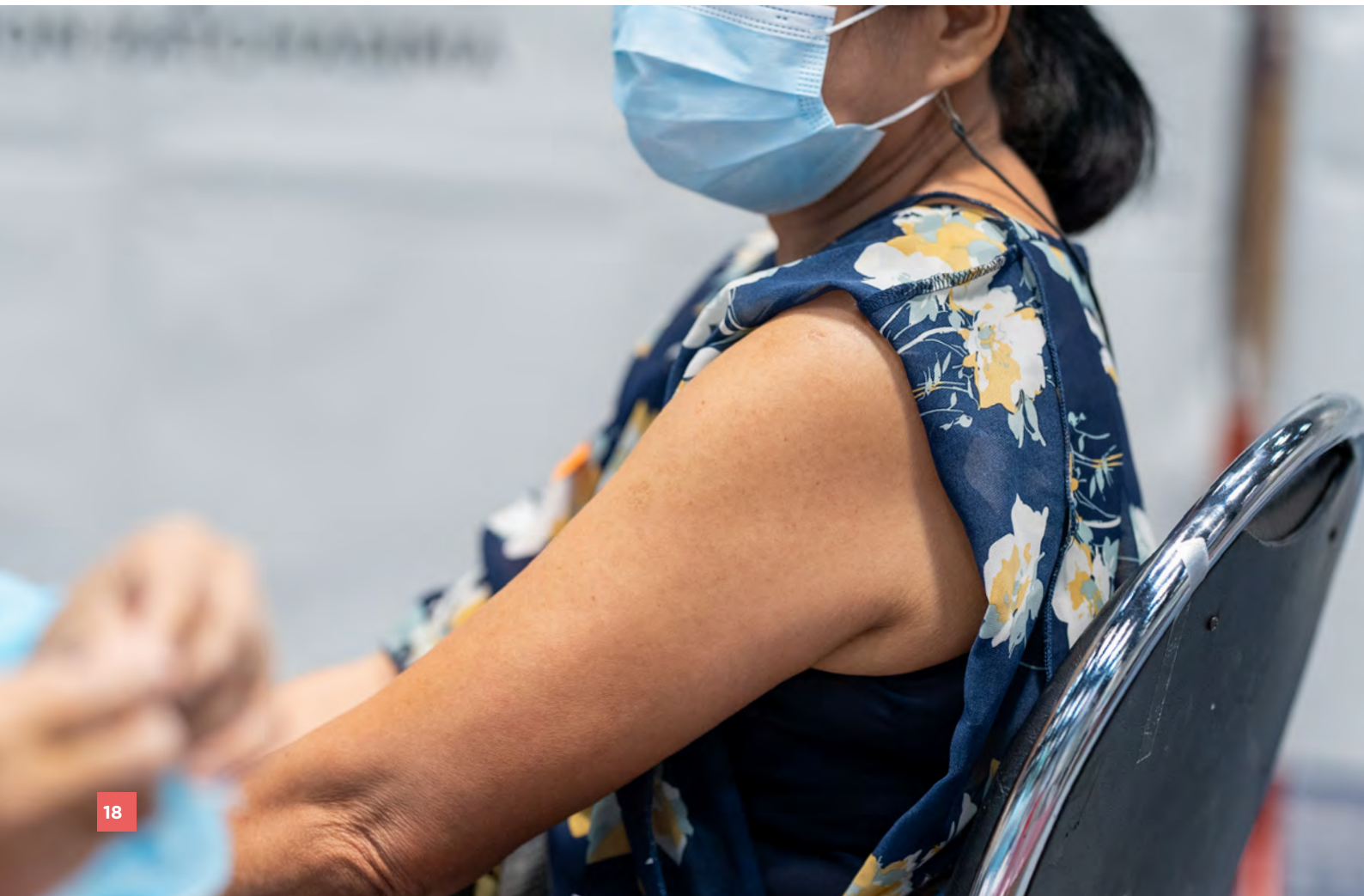
Among the 8,000m<sup>2</sup> of floorspace brought into custodian ownership is the enormous and precious Observer Building. The building closed in 1985 and was rotting away, despite 13 separate owners, until it was purchased by Hastings Commons in 2019 and vital repairs undertaken. The lower floors are now fully refurbished, offering affordable workspace and event space to local businesses and a creative digital hub for young people and residents.

Hastings Commons has also transformed the alley behind the Observer Building, created rental homes based on income not market value in nearby Cambridge Road, set up a public living room in a former carpet showroom and started work to bring a community asset transfer building back from dereliction.



# Inequalities increased by COVID-19

The pandemic highlighted existing inequalities in poor communities across a huge range of areas including health and employment as well as accessing Universal Credit and housing.





**Vaccination rates across the borough were lower than the county and regional averages**

particularly in town centre areas and within the social housing estates. This trends was particularly acute within Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities in poorer wards, particularly in the town centres where many ethnic minorities live. The pandemic made clear that minorities often lack confidence in vaccines and have unhealthier lifestyles.

A recent HVA study on the impact of COVID-19 on the BAME population of Hastings and St Leonards found:

- BAME communities do not see themselves as a single homogenous group making the development of a single engagement strategy very difficult.
- The term BAME itself creates a barrier to effective engagement.
- BAME communities lack trust in the NHS due to previous experiences.
- The stigma of being diagnosed with COVID-19 prevented some members of the local community from accessing support and advice.
- The risk of COVID infection increased/decreased in line with socio economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, education and immigration status, rather than by ethnicity.
- Community leaders and influential sources of information are difficult to identify but are critical for bringing about effective change.
- Previous health awareness raising activities or strategies that did not bring about lasting change or ended without proper feedback/ community consultation have affected engagement with the BAME community

**COVID-19 VACCINATION IN NUMBERS**

**61.5%** of eligible people\* **fully vaccinated** in **Hastings**.

**51.8%** of eligible people\* **fully vaccinated** in **central St Leonards**.

This compares to **69.1%** in East Sussex.

NHS Sussex, 7 September 2022.

\*aged 12 and over.

**18** of the **top 20 unvaccinated wards** in East Sussex are in the seaside communities of **Hastings, Eastbourne** and **Newhaven**.

NHS

**HEALTH INEQUALITIES IN NUMBERS**

According to the July 2021 report of the Chief Medical Officer for England **coastal/peripheral communities** had

**15%** **less consultants**

**14.5%** **fewer post graduate trainees** and

**7.4%** **less nurses**

The report also highlighted the stark **gap in life expectancy and general health** experienced locally, particularly **mental health**.

## Engaging new audiences

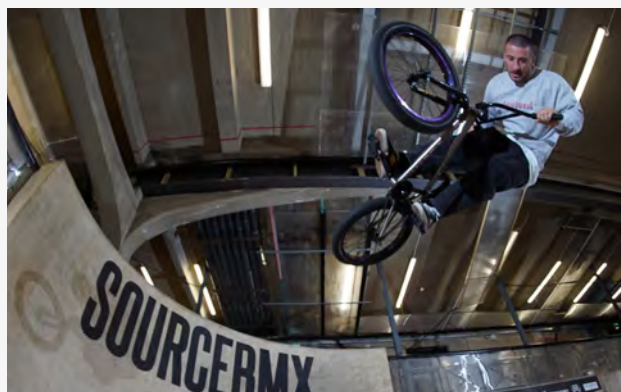
### Hastings United

Members of the Hastings Hub teamed up with Hastings United to hold a COVID-19 vaccination campaign at the club's home ground. The campaign targeted working age men who often fall outside traditional community health initiatives. As well as an innovative campaign attracting regional media attention, the campaign "United against COVID" offered information and vaccinations at home games with free admission for those being vaccinated. Around 200 people were vaccinated at games but the real impact was reaching a new audience that may not have received the COVID jab. The campaign was a great example of how future engagement could be shaped.



### Source Park

A collaboration between the NHS and the Source Park, a popular Hastings skateboard venue, targeted young people who are sceptical or disinterested in the views of the health establishment. This partnership showed that new ways of engaging with young people on health issues are possible including those who view themselves as excluded or rejected by their peer groups.



### Hastings Voluntary Action

HVA has always prioritised its relationships with communities that have faced economic and social exclusion on the borough's social housing estates. This included ensuring the residents of north east Hastings and Hollington got direct access to COVID vaccinations.

The long standing relationships developed in those communities will be a valuable platform for dealing with the impact of fuel poverty and inflation.



# Volunteering is changing

COVID-19 sparked innumerable acts of kindness as local people stepped up to help their friends, neighbours and strangers.



## VOLUNTEERING IN NUMBERS

# 47%

The percentage of people in the UK who informally volunteered during the pandemic. **52%** of those were helping people affected by COVID-19 or the consequences of lockdown.

# 26%

The percentage of UK residents who volunteered at the beginning of the pandemic. **9%** were **new volunteers** and **6% lapsed volunteers**. Those from ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely to be new volunteers. **26% of respondents** said COVID-19 was an obstacle to volunteering. This was most noticeable among those with a long-term illness or disability.

Source: Kantar survey for UK Government.

At the local level, community support organisations like **HEART** were quickly set up offering fast paced, flexible, task based approaches to volunteering largely driven by social media. However, the overall health of volunteering in our community is variable. Some organisations are reporting that long-standing volunteers with underlying health issues haven't returned post-pandemic. There are also concerns that others have burned out supporting the local COVID-19 effort.

There is a need to understand local patterns and provide an evidence base for further activity.

HVA commissioned the **Institute of Volunteering Research** (IVR) to look at trends in volunteering. The report, **Volunteering Voices - A future vision for Hastings**, is now published and the evidence and insight gathered will inform the development of a borough volunteering strategy.

## CASE STUDY

### HEART volunteers step up during COVID crisis



**“The response, cooperation and energy shown by volunteers in the pandemic was astonishing, people just wanted to help and they had a bit more time. HEART promotes flexible volunteering that enables you to choose when and how you do it. We know peoples’ lives are already stretched but we also know that there’s a huge amount of willingness to make a difference, it’s harnessing that motivation and supporting it properly - that’s the key.”**  
Kim Batty, HEART

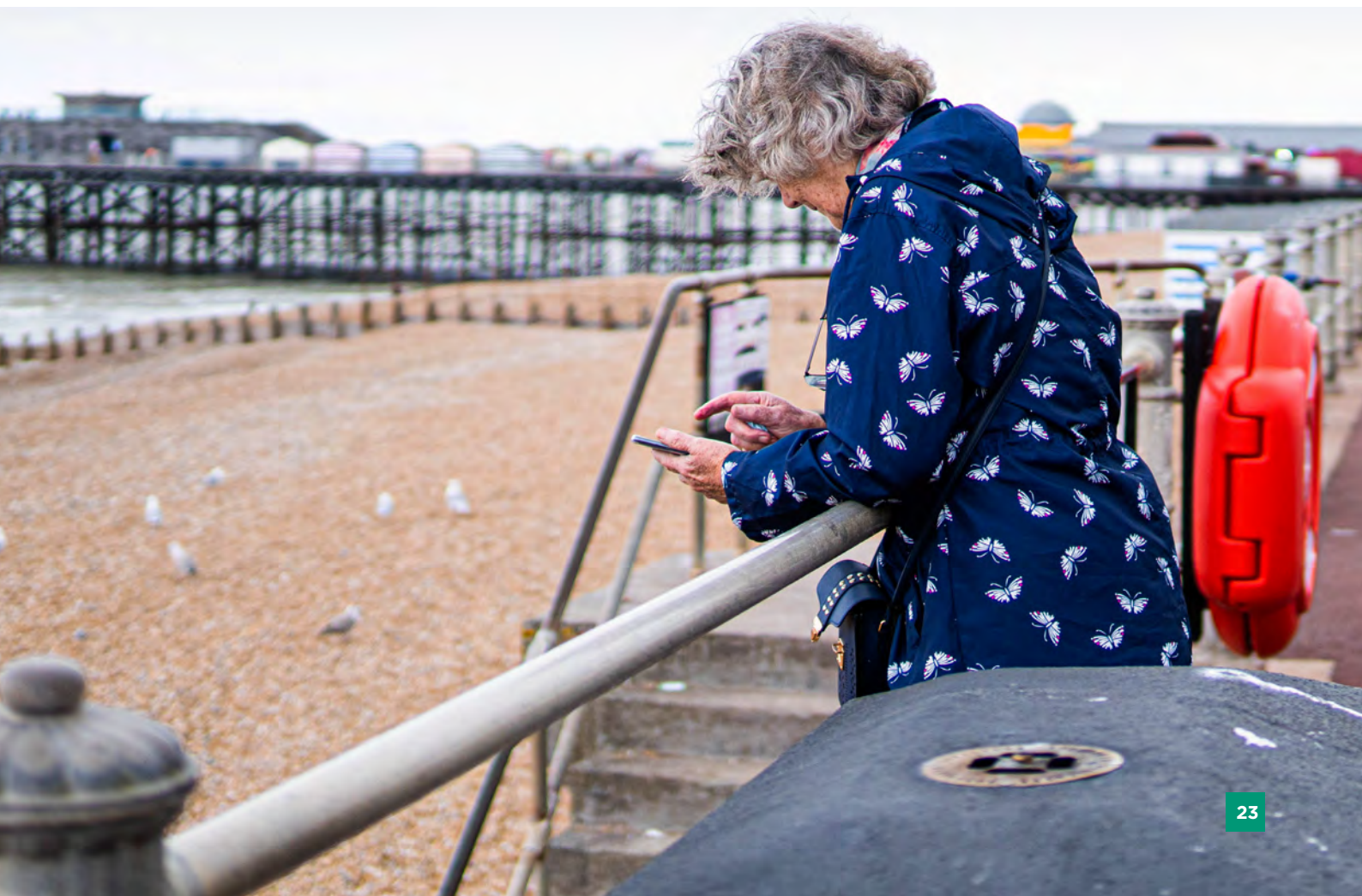
IVR have stated: **“Hastings is in an excellent position to drive a positive vision for inclusive volunteering with impacts on communities, organisations and volunteers. Many residents feel that Hastings already offers them a sense of community, belonging and connectedness. This is supported by a vibrant and strong voluntary and community sector, which involves many regular volunteers in ways that enable them to make a difference and in ways that improve the volunteers’ health.**

**“Compared to the national picture, it even appears that volunteering in Hastings is more common than in the rest of England.**

**“Crucially, volunteers report that they feel their volunteering makes a difference. This is likely to be connected to positive volunteer experiences, which can be linked to the effective activities of volunteer involving organisations.”**

# Integrated service access will be vital

The most deprived and disadvantaged residents are those who encounter the most difficulty navigating services which involve more than one organisation.



**The Hub** has made it easier for service users to make connections and for us to develop approaches which are more client centred. At times, however, the system seems to make it as difficult as possible for clients to get what they need, as often there is no joined-up approach between organisations.

## CASE STUDY

### Digital Pilot Scheme

**Patient M** was suffering from manic depression and had multiple complex needs when he arrived at the Conquest Hospital. COVID-19 restrictions meant his friends couldn't stay and A&E staff had only incomplete access to his records. Despite presenting as a clear suicide risk, he was discharged without a referral to mental health services, a community support team, his GP or even a call to the friends who'd brought him in. Later that day, Patient M took his own life.

Lack of centralised information, issues over patient confidentiality and no joined up post-discharge support can have significant, negative consequences on vulnerable people like Patient M.

The **Digital Pilot Scheme** was designed to help ensure people who are experiencing complex issues receive the right kind of support following hospital discharge.

Funded by the Community Renewal Fund, the scheme has enabled the design of a technical platform and a series of workshops for voluntary organisations on data sharing.

#### OUTCOME

**The system failed Patient M. Programmes like the Digital Pilot Scheme could ensure that other vulnerable people get the right support.**

## SERVICE DEMAND IN NUMBERS

# 1 in 5

Nationally, the number of women aged 16-34 who have **serious money problems** and have **self-harmed** in the last year. Women who have fallen behind on **utility payments** are **three times** more likely to **self-harm**.

# 78

The average age a **newborn boy** in Hastings can expect to live compared to 80.6 regionally. A **newborn girl** can expect to live to **81.8** compared to 84.1 regionally. Despite being the youngest borough in the county it has the **highest rate of actual and projected life limiting illnesses** and people reporting **ill health**.

# 68%

The increase in referrals to the FSN run **Dragonflies Bereavement Project** in the last year. There has also been a **400%** increase in referrals for **suicide** since 2019/20.

# 61%

The increase in **safeguarding referrals** to FSN's three nurseries. FSN's children and young people mental health project received **314 referrals** in the last year, mainly for **anxiety, low self-esteem and anger issues**.



# Knowledge will increasingly need to be shared

The creation of the Hastings COVID-19 Community Hub during the pandemic shows how local voluntary organisations can share problems, expertise and develop creative solutions



During the pandemic, **the Hub** held learning sessions to look at issues around volunteering, recovery and wellbeing. For many participants this was a unique experience to share what was happening locally and discuss what was needed. Going forward, the Hub will continue to support partners in developing skills and a sense of common purpose and action.

**Golden Thread** training enabling nine local organisations to respond to the needs of those with mental health issues to access services and support digitally will provide sector leaders with facilitated learning opportunities to enable new collaborative responses.

To recognise changes to the population demographic, the local voluntary sector is leading work to make Hastings an **Age Friendly Community** within the World Health Organisation framework to ensure local services meet changing needs.

**'Get Chatting'** is a fortnightly social event set up by HEART to bring people together and have a chat. This could be with each other or a volunteer. Mobility and transport can be a big part of feeling isolated, so volunteers can also give people a lift. For some people, it's the only bit of social interaction they get and makes a huge difference to their well-being.

## **JOINED UP ACTION TO TACKLE LONELINESS AND ISOLATION**

A telephone befriending service was a direct response to the pandemic by Hastings Community Hub. It revealed the urgent need for a joined-up approach to widespread loneliness and isolation.

This led to the development by HEART of the **Hastings Befriending Network** which aims to make sure that loneliness is addressed and other needs investigated.

We welcome the work led by East Sussex County Council to develop a **strategic approach to tackling isolation and loneliness** across the county involving statutory and voluntary partners.

## CASE STUDY

### **Lockdown lonely turned to befriending network**

**Client S**, 72, first contacted HEART for transport to her local vaccination centre. Registered disabled – although mobile – she was already receiving weekly visits from adult social care but was feeling isolated and showing early signs of dementia.

As a vulnerable person, COVID-19 had made Client S more dependant than ever on these lifeline support services provided by her social worker. However, little was being done to address the loneliness resulting from multiple lockdowns.



As a result, Client S is one of potentially hundreds who could benefit from the new **Hastings Befriending Network** under development by HEART which brings together multiple organisations working to address the issue to co-develop and engage clients in a broad range of activities, events and pastimes to enable isolated people to meet contemporaries, forge new friendships and create sustainable support networks to reduce the impacts of loneliness in the community.

### **OUTCOME**

**The Hastings Befriending Network and Get Chatting have offered hundreds of Hastings residents a lifeline in the form of new friends and social networks.**

# Community connections will need to be rebuilt

At the heart of this report is an understanding that relationships between some disadvantaged communities and the town's civic institutions weakened during COVID.



Many of the public sector organisations which were key to maintaining strong connections with local people in areas such as community cohesion or neighbourhood policing have been **significantly reduced**. Neighbourhood planning, forums and area management have been replaced with a more remote service model. **This makes future engagement and consultation more challenging.**

The COVID-19 vaccine programme showed that we need to look at how we can genuinely engage with those who are least likely to access services or tell us themselves what they need. It was clear that many men, young people and some ethnic minority groups didn't believe the vaccine messages.

The pandemic exposed the limits of TV, radio, national poster and other conventional marketing as an effective tool to reach sizeable parts of the community. It was apparent some channels need repair while others – for example with some young people – needed to be built for the first time.

The use of influencers and other voices that command attention in this part of the community must be better understood. It is clear that in order for this to happen, Hastings needs to repair or replace community structures that have failed, been de-funded or don't reflect new ways of communicating.

The town has a proud history of regeneration but its next phase needs to be more inclusive and impact more on those who have the least control of their social and economic lives. Regeneration programmes like the **Town Deal** seem likely to benefit from the government's levelling up policy. **The Local Strategic Partnership** (LSP) has taken the decision to set up a health equalities group which is beginning work on a regeneration approach centred on impacts on physical and mental health.

## COVID-19 VACCINATION BOOSTER RATES IN NUMBERS

The pandemic emphasised disparities in vaccination rates between Hastings and the rest of East Sussex.

Central St Leonards, Hastings town centre, Broomgrove, Hollington and other poorer communities have very low vaccination rates. In particular, **12-15-year-olds** in the town were among the **least vaccinated in all of Sussex**, well below the England and the south east average.

COVID-19 vaccination booster rates for people over 12 as of 7 September 2022 were:

### Hastings town centre

**51.8%**

### Central St Leonards

**51.8%**

### Broomgrove

**51.5%**

These rates compare with more affluent parts of the area such as:

### Conquest and St Helens

**76.1%**

NHS Sussex, 7 September 2022

## Restoring community connections

Two examples of how community connections are being restored stand out.

### Pathways from Poverty programme

The **Hastings Sustainable Food Network** joined **Feeding Britain** to pilot their **Pathways from Poverty** programme.

The network set up pop up surplus food distribution centres, a community lunch club in partnership with East Sussex College and provided training to volunteers. Just as significant is the relationships with the local Primary Care Network, East Sussex College Group, public health, councils and other voluntary sector partners to drive this work forward through projects like the **East Sussex Healthy Weight Project** which gives out small grants to help improve access to food, skills and opportunities



### Crime and COVID



The impact of COVID-19 has worsened tensions in poorer communities, particularly **Hollington** and **north east Hastings**. Reported **anti-social behaviour** in these wards has **more than doubled** since the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.

**Public place violent crime figures** have also risen in the town centre with late night, alcohol fuelled violence increasing as a result of a reduced understanding of responsible alcohol drinking levels.

Area **schools** are dealing with **high levels of absenteeism** as well as **drug dealing** and **knives** on campus. So-called **county lines gangs** operate in Hastings with young people selling drugs brought in from London and around the country.

Locally run **organised crime groups** have also started to appear in Hastings, affecting neighbouring Bexhill and Sidley.

The enforced absences from school meant that some young people found **readjustment to education** very difficult. Coupled with increasing pressures caused by **safeguarding issues**, this points to significant challenges.

However, these are being addressed through joint work between the **police, Hastings Borough Council, ESCC's Early Help Services, EFT, schools** and **housing associations**.

# Facing the future together

This report features many of the organisations that have played different roles in the life of the Hastings COVID-19 Community Hub. Capturing the learning from this experience, it is published as a third sector response to the rapid changes the town is facing.



**Drawing conclusions from such a complex and fast-moving situation is challenging, but it is possible to reach a consensus about the changes needed to ensure Hastings and St Leonards are better placed to face shocks and disruptions such as COVID-19 as well as profit from any future opportunities that arise.**

■ **Hub members recommend that health (in its broadest sense) be made a central part of planning our response** to both emergencies and developing the strategic future. This includes the health of people but also a healthy, inclusive and responsive community.

■ **Social targets such as health need to be included as key measures of regeneration success.** If the concept of levelling up is to mean anything in Hastings, the disparity of health outcomes faced in the most deprived areas in the town will require a consistent, effective and coordinated approach.



■ **Contacts developed during the pandemic should now be used to push forward health-focused regeneration and inclusion.** For example, the Hastings Mosque worked hard to maximise the vaccine take up among its members and is one of the platforms that could be used to strengthen health and inclusion work.

■ **The impact of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine has exacerbated pre-existing weakness including health inequalities.** It is suggested that a summit of lead agencies conduct a SWOT analysis to develop a shared, owned and strategic approach to sustain existing projects and address gaps.



■ **A new theory of change embracing the health inequalities approach to regeneration will produce a more coherent approach** and allow partners to respond strategically to future funding opportunities.

■ **The pandemic exposed the limits of TV, radio, national poster and other conventional marketing as effective tools for reaching sizeable parts of the community.** The use of influencers and other voices that command attention must be better understood.

■ **Hastings has a mixed history of regeneration and its next phase must be more inclusive and impact more on those who have the least control of their social and economic lives.** Partnership-based community engagement must be focused on learning from, and empowering, local communities in need. The voluntary sector needs to be included at all stages of the development of growth and inclusion strategies.

■ **We must ensure that buildings created by public finance are not simply sold off at a time when the voluntary sector is badly in need of accessible space.** The partnership between HVA and Hastings Borough Council created Jackson Hall, a vibrant space for community innovation and support which could be replicated elsewhere.

■ **A thought out and planned approach to community asset transfers is urged.** For example, there is increasing need for additional food training and preparation space to deliver healthy eating objectives that could impact on the health of poorer and minority communities.

■ **Hybrid working began before COVID but was firmly consolidated during the pandemic.**

Third sector staff and volunteers will continue to work using a mixture of office, home or mobile resources. Organisations must have the money to invest in new facilities, technology and systems to make this work effectively.

■ **Creating a physical space for joint working and shared service delivery should be considered** as part of the evaluation of the impact of community hubs being carried out by East Sussex County Council.

■ **A mechanism needs to be developed** to allow the enormous local commitment to working collaboratively to operate in a systematic way to leverage the time and efforts of volunteers.

■ **The pandemic highlighted the need for ongoing flexibility rather than a rapid return to silo thinking.** The invasion of Ukraine has shown that one shock can follow another. It is likely that higher food and fuel costs and a possible shift towards increased defence spending at the expense of other programmes means that an action plan for the coming winter is urgently needed.

■ **The impact of high levels of transient private sector tenants needs to be properly understood.** Social landlords can and do offer support to their tenants, but the position of many transient private sector tenants is likely to become much more difficult.



In addition to these strategic suggestions, it is recommended that:

■ **Borough partners, possibly through the Community Response Hub, put in place an emergency plan to address the urgent need for warmth and security facing Hastings and St Leonards residents this winter, and probably for the foreseeable future. The cost of living crisis and rising fuel bills will affect all our citizens but for the most vulnerable in the community this unprecedented increase in the cost of utilities combined with rising prices for food, transport and rent will be particularly devastating. The Community Response Hub will provide the co-ordination and cohesion that marked its work during the Covid pandemic and is currently working on a Winter Preparedness plan to mitigate the the cost of living crisis.**

■ **The work around health inequalities, including the Local Strategic Partnership organised conference that was addressed by England's chief medical officer Chris Whitty, be used as the basis for a more detailed action plan for the future of Hastings and St Leonards.**





## Below are the organisations which have played different roles in the life of the Hub.

This report captures what they have learned and is published as a third sector response to the rapid changes we are undergoing.

### **AgeUK East Sussex**

01273 476704

[www.ageuk.org.uk/eastsussex](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/eastsussex)

### **Care for the Carers**

01323 738390

[www.cftc.org.uk](http://www.cftc.org.uk)

### **Citizens Advice 1066**

01424 869 352

[www.eastsussexcab.co.uk](http://www.eastsussexcab.co.uk)

### **East Sussex County Council**

0345 608 0190

[www.eastsussex.gov.uk](http://www.eastsussex.gov.uk)

### **Education Futures Trust**

01424 722241

[www.educationfuturestrust.org](http://www.educationfuturestrust.org)

### **FSN Charity**

01424 423683

[www.fsncharity.co.uk](http://www.fsncharity.co.uk)

### **Hastings Borough Council**

01424 451066

[www.hastings.gov.uk](http://www.hastings.gov.uk)

### **Hastings Voluntary Action**

01424 444010

[www.hastingsvoluntaryaction.org.uk](http://www.hastingsvoluntaryaction.org.uk)

### **HEART**

01424 235290

[www.hastingsheart.com](http://www.hastingsheart.com)

### **Kings Church 1066**

01424 755990

[kings1066.org](http://kings1066.org)

### **NHS Sussex**

0800 433 4545

[www.sussex.ics.nhs.uk/nhs-sussex](http://www.sussex.ics.nhs.uk/nhs-sussex)

### **Optivo**

0800 121 60 60

[www.optivo.org.uk](http://www.optivo.org.uk)

### **Orbit Housing Association**

01424 767700

[www.orbit.org.uk](http://www.orbit.org.uk)

### **Seaview Project**

01424 717981

[www.seaviewproject.co.uk](http://www.seaviewproject.co.uk)

## AND FINALLY...

This report reflects a range of efforts from a huge number of individuals and organisations who supported the COVID-19 effort in Hastings but who also chose to share their learning in order that what happened during that period was not lost and could influence change for the future.

We appreciate them all including:

- The town's volunteers, activists and good neighbours who never stopped giving their time
- The amazing network of Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise Organisations who maintained services in the most difficult circumstance
- The businesses who supported organised and donated
- The members of the Community Hub (voluntary, public and private sector), Hastings Community Network and other service providers who shared their learning and experience to contribute to this report
- Those who shared their stories statistics and case studies
- Colleagues at HVA, in particular Simon Hubbard, Steve Manwaring and Janet McLean, for supporting and facilitating the production of this document.

# Thank you.





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