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“true reflection of everyone's input and ideas.”

APRIL - JUNE 2023

Mr Hastings & St Leonards Stories of Significant Change

Merman and Walking the Fish Event

JUNE 2024

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Mr Hastings and St Leonards is a three-year initiative funded by East Sussex County Council, hosted by Hastings Voluntary Action and led by local men. It has its origins in a desire to take a more co-ordinated, system-wide approach to tackling the issue of falling male life expectancy in Hastings.

The long-term vision is that men living in Hastings and St Leonards are at the heart of decision making about their lives, are living happier, healthier, and longer lives, and thrive in strong, supportive, and well-connected communities where they can fulfil their potential. The project has set out to do this by establishing a self-defining and self-sustaining 'social movement' for men's health and wellbeing in Hastings and St Leonards, based on the principles of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD).

More information about the project is available [here](#).

A range of people, with different connections to Mr Hastings & St Leonards, were asked "What is the most significant change that you've seen or experienced as a result of Mr Hastings & St Leonards?"

The stories came from the men involved in this work, Hastings Voluntary Action, East Sussex County Council and those from the community and voluntary sector.

The resulting ten stories are included in this booklet.

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Innovation - Men's
mental Health

1. An asset based community development approach

I was employed as the Community development worker for a men's health and wellbeing initiative using an Asset Based Community Development approach. The significant change for me was that, unlike some other projects, I was enabled to use this approach authentically and meaningfully. This is not always the case as often project delivery targets involve competing outcome, and delivery needs which opposes the ABCD approach.

Using the ABCD approach has been borne out by the engagement from local men and their readiness to engage in conversations about their health and wellbeing.

Using a strength-based approach appealed to the men I engaged with and opened up honest and open conversations without the men feeling dismantled, and they talked about issues relating to being a 'man', masculinity and their mental health - nothing was off the table.

This Initiative was able to become an asset and not a threat for local men and has enabled a change in the dialogue, between the men, the HVA team, the wider community, and agencies and decision makers that impact on local men's lives.

Although the men themselves may not recognise the approach used is an ABCD approach they respond with enthusiasm and motivation, the project approaches men as the curators of their own destinies, which has been a refreshing and novel experience for some men.

The ABCD approach when delivered authentically allows for meaningful and trusting relationships to develop that ripple out further into the community and touch more lives and is the beginning of real change in our communities.

The men took the project's focus to men's mental health really early on and we have followed that energy as this was a recurring theme that came up again and again. This was a significant shift in understanding as the traditional view that 'Men Don't Talk' about their mental health and feelings was reimaged via the men's trajectory over the project.

The men involved have been brave and inspiring sharing their mental health challenges via films, podcasts, stage performances, events and conversations and men's mental health is the basis for the Men's Room CIC.

On a personal level this has been a really rewarding and valuable insight into men's health and wellbeing as I have been able to walk alongside the men in this project and marvel at their passion and progression for taking for men's health and wellbeing forward into their communities.

Going forward the foundations have been laid for future development and growth for men's health and wellbeing in Hastings and St Leonards and using the ABCD approach has enabled men to strive forward with the tools and resources they need.

What made it so significant?

Transparency and honesty with all involved have enabled the project to be delivered in a true ABCD way sharing both challenges and positives.

Modelling the realities of ABCD and the components needed for this approach to be successful, turning traditional outcomes and expectations around and being able to demonstrate that meaningful change happens from within and alongside and not to communities.

Something incredible happens when you are given the space and time to truly be in charge of your own outcomes and I see this in the men I have worked alongside for nearly 3 years.

This doesn't happen a lot as services, employers and authorities usually do it for us, but we lose our authenticity and our belief in our own ability to change ourselves and look to others to fix things.

This initiative has been given the time and energy from all involved to evolve key human abilities and see a more hopeful future.

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2. A flexible approach to commissioning to support potential change

As men's mental health is a priority within Public Health we previously commissioned a community development project in Hastings that offered small funding pots for the development of activities that gave opportunities for men to connect together and offer mutual support.

As that project was ending Mr Hastings and St Leonards was emerging as a project or a 'movement' that those local men in Hastings could connect with and generate more ways to offer mutual support and connection. As a co-chair of a newly formed Men's Mental Health Community of Interest Group, that initially was only East Sussex and is now Pan Sussex, I have been really encouraged to see the level of interest and engagement around men's mental health that has been generated by the Mr Hastings and St Leonard's work.

From a commissioning perspective it is really fascinating to see this project develop from the voices and stories of local men, without a pre-set agenda of how they need to conduct themselves and what they will deliver.

The project team have generated an approach that gives the support the men involved need, whilst also encouraging them to develop ideas that they think could make a difference to them around their health and wellbeing.

What made it so significant?

What is so significant is that the project team have had the freedom to, as they describe it, "go where the energy has taken us" and that is quite unusual for a project with the level of funding that Mr Hastings and St Leonard's has had. Usually there would be a set of KPIs to deliver.

3. Resilience and purpose leading to wider community connections

When I first engaged with this project, I saw that the passion from the whole lived experience and professional community was very high. The challenges of putting into practice as a new team with common goal was and still is the main driver for collaboration. In the two years of engagement, I have found a renews vigour in life which has helped with home life and work stresses. Also, I have become more resilient and have discovered more about myself as a man, father, husband and human being. This project has provided me with a life purpose. As it has for other men and women involved. We are seeing the results in each project we deliver. Talk Club has just completed its fourth session. We started with four men on Week 1 and now have seven men attending. With new additions each week. It's very brave to step into a meeting to bare all when you don't know anyone there. We have also stretched our message overseas. With a regular podcast subscriber in Germany!

This project has led me (and us as a team which includes HVA) to accelerate our ideas of engagement with supporting men of all ages with their mental struggles. 2024 culminated in Mr Hastings representatives speaking at the Houses of Parliament on a panel with national mental health figures and MPs supporting this cause. We have also migrated this project to support its longevity by starting a CIC to continue this support long term.

What made it so significant?

- As a team we have pushed ideas and events to the wider community to see what resonated.
- Representing Mr Hastings throughout the year at local events, colleges, Hospices, LGBTQ events, Houses of Parliament and Local Council.
- Creating a website with upcoming event information and support guides
- Winning the 2025 Baton of Hope event
- Starting a Talk Club in Hastings. The first in the South East.
- Making an award-winning film about Mental Health issues in Hastings.

4. Increased partnership working leading to new possibilities

Increased partnership working would be the most significant change I've directly experienced. Both with HVA and Mr Hastings & St Leonards.

We've been able to create a link between the Hospice and HVA to support this initiative, boosted by my own professional connection with HVA initially. So, for the Mr Hastings & St Leonards project, there is a clear point of contact at each organisation. Our organisation's partnership has grown as a result of Mr Hastings & St Leonards too.

I think through the course of the project's development and the various things that have sprung out of it – the relationship between the Hospice and HVA is probably a little bit more rounded now. I wouldn't say it's a whole Hospice link-up with Mr Hastings & Saint Leonards - we're not quite there - but definitely the relationship building has meant that more people within our organisation are aware of what's going on, both with Mr. Hastings and St Leonards and with HVA generally. I have steered new staff – for example, our inclusion lead, in the direction of HVA due to the strength of this work and our connection.

Our 'Compassionate Communities' team structure supports opportunities for staff to get involved with wider community activities. I tend to get involved with most of the Mr. Hastings and St Leonard's activities as the 'Men's Champion'. We had a piece of internal Hospice work that linked well with the themes being explored in the men's champions activities around men's views on why the health and life expectancy of men in the town would be significantly less than other parts of the country. I approached our senior leadership team and asked to do some exploratory research work on behalf of Mr. Hastings and St Leonards to 'start the conversation'. The leadership team supported this - they were aware through previous forums and research that men are underrepresented in the hospice in terms of the demographic – staff, volunteers and residents (an 80/20 split). I started having conversations with men at our events and groups, and with staff members, to get their views.

Maz, from Mr Hastings & St Leonards – a fellow Men's Champion - heard about what we were exploring and we started a conversation, sharing links and ideas. It started a ripple effect that led to the Hospice initiating a bereavement group for men that we launched midway through 2024, and then later an LGBTQI+ bereavement group. We might have arrived at these men's bereavement group ideas at some point ourselves, but it would have taken more time potentially - it was through linking in with Mr. Hastings and St Leonards that brought them about more quickly and to an extent in the form they currently take where people can self-refer into them.

As a side note – another ripple was that our conversations got Mr Hastings & St Leonards thinking about other talk groups and that's led to those men forming a Thursday talk club. Today, what we've got is an external group that we can promote to our community, and we can promote our Hospice groups through Mr. Hastings and St Leonards.

Overall, our Hospice team have improved awareness about how men can access community support.

What made it so significant?

Mr Hastings & St Leonards has seeded work to happen in the community, but it's also raised awareness within the hospice – staff, volunteers and the men who connect with us.

For example, one chap in particular - he's in his 80s – his original connection is with the hospice but he's gone and attended some drumming groups and activities like that through Mr Hastings & St Leonards, which has been quite interesting.

Men have either actively, or in a supported way, sought other opportunities in the community. It's early days still for it, but it's a beginning of something.

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5. A shift in perception as a commissioner

The most significant change I have personally experienced as part of my involvement in the Mr Hastings and St Leonards programme has been a change in how I feel about the adoption of an asset-based community development approach within commissioning / contract management (through experiencing the benefits of this).

Prior to Mr Hastings and St Leonards, my commissioning and contract management experience had been very typical of a conventional commissioning model, i.e. focused on addressing a need / deficit, tightly defined activities, pre-identified performance measures, and a clear commissioner-provider relationship that could unintentionally lead to power dynamics. When I first inherited Mr Hastings and St Leonards as a 'grant agreement' to oversee, I was informed that there were no KPIs and that the project reported to a much broader steering group, for which Public Health were an equal member of (despite being sole funders).

Through fortnightly meetings with the Project Manager for the Mr Hastings and St Leonards programme, I learnt more about an ABCD approach and resisted my natural reflex to establish some defined activities, boundaries, and timeframes to the work, instead allowing the project to follow the energy of the men within the wider community and their ideas and aspirations. Whilst at times this certainly felt uncomfortable, the process was aided through the strong trusting relationships I developed with the project team as well as through the creation of an ongoing learning environment, that has been transparent about successes, challenges, opportunities and risks. Through this process, I have learnt to:

- Act with more trust (by delegating the direction the work has taken to local men)
- Be more flexible and embrace the fact that plans may change or evolve (both quickly or slowly)
- Resist the need to always attach hard deadlines or defined outputs to various aspects of the programme (embrace the value of being more iterative and adaptive as part of contract management and supporting ongoing service delivery)

- Feel more comfortable with the feeling of the unknown (including ability to mitigate against potential project risks). At one stage, I was quite apprehensive about local men leading and deciding the name and branding of the project and what this could look like and struggled with a natural urge to 'control' some aspects of this.
- Resist the need to become an expert in the field and more actively embrace the expertise or skills of others as part of commissioner-provider relationship.
- Pro-actively 'embrace' and enable innovation as a commissioner.
- More actively consider assets and aspirations of local residents as part of other areas of commissioning I am involved in (e.g. inclusion of co-production strategy within re-commissioning of Integrated Health and Wellbeing Strategy that also adopts an ABCD approach).

In a nutshell, the most significant change I have experienced personally as a commissioner has been to 'Step back, be brave and trust the process'!

What made it so significant?

I believe that through embracing an asset-based community development approach as part of commissioning / contract management as opposed to a more conventional model (and through the actions / learning described above), this has been significant (alongside many other factors) in enabling the project to develop the momentum it has achieved to-date, creating the conditions for wider change and the foundations for sustainability. By enabling the programme to be authentic in its ABCD approach and to be truly led by the assets, needs and aspirations of local men, this has seen a group of core men remain actively engaged in the project for 2+ years and be proactive in establishing a mechanism to support sustainability (e.g. becoming a CIC and seeking funding). This is unlikely to have been achieved if the commissioning arrangements had been more prescriptive in terms of core activities and outcomes. This project has evolved over time to adopt more of a mental health focus and has taken (perhaps a surprisingly) more 'creative' direction because of it being led by local men (i.e. the Men Don't Talk film, the Monologues, the Merman, Muriel, etc). Without embracing flexibility in the evolution of the project, I believe that some of the early outcomes and ripple effects that have been achieved to date may have not come to fruition.

6. Creativity outreach supporting community-driven spaces

The Mr Hastings and St Leonards project has brought about a profound transformation in the community, particularly in how men engage with their health and well-being. One of the most significant changes witnessed is the creation of safe spaces where men feel comfortable discussing their mental health, an area that has historically been difficult to address. In a community where male life expectancy is lower than the national average.

A key aspect of this transformation is the increased engagement and participation of local men in various initiatives. The formation of groups such as the Grumpy Men's Club has provided a non-judgmental environment where men can connect, share their thoughts, and find camaraderie. These groups have played a vital role in reducing isolation, which is a major contributor to poor mental health. Events such as the Men's Health Week Celebration have further strengthened this sense of community, drawing attention to important issues and encouraging more men to take an active role in their well-being.

The development of peer support networks has been another pivotal change. The project has fostered relationships among men who may have otherwise remained isolated, creating a sense of belonging that has had a tangible impact on their lives. Through structured activities, discussions, and outreach programs, participants have found support in one another, demonstrating the power of collective healing. These networks extend beyond formal meetings, as friendships formed within the project often continue outside of structured sessions, reinforcing the benefits of peer support.

One of the most striking elements of the project has been its creative and community-driven approach. Initiatives such as the Merman Project have challenged traditional perceptions of masculinity, allowing men to express themselves in new and meaningful ways. By engaging in artistic endeavours, participants have not only found joy and fulfilment but have also contributed to breaking down societal stigmas surrounding men's emotional expression.

This creative outreach has served as a powerful tool for engagement, bringing

together individuals who might not have otherwise participated in health-focused discussions.

Furthermore, the project's impact has extended beyond its immediate participants, gaining recognition and contributing to broader cultural change. The visibility of the initiative within Hastings and St Leonards has grown significantly, with its approach now being considered a model for addressing men's health in other regions. The increasing recognition of the project's effectiveness has opened doors for potential expansion and sustainability, ensuring that its benefits continue to reach those in need.

Overall, the Mr Hastings and St Leonards project has achieved a remarkable transformation in the local community. By fostering open conversations, strengthening support networks, and encouraging creative expression, it has created a lasting impact on the lives of many men. As participation continues to grow and the initiative gains wider acknowledgment, the project stands as a testament to the power of community-driven solutions in tackling complex health and well-being challenges.

What made it so significant?

A particularly innovative aspect of the project has been the Mobile Sofa, a creative and engaging outreach tool that brings conversations about men's health into public spaces. The Mobile Sofa is a sofa on wheels, placed in different locations across Hastings and St Leonards to create a relaxed and informal setting for men to talk about their well-being. This initiative has helped reach individuals who might not actively seek out support, breaking down barriers by making discussions about mental health accessible and approachable in everyday settings.

Another creative initiative that has gained attention is the Men Don't Talk film, which was filmed in a local barbershop. This short film explores the often-unspoken struggles men face with their mental health, using the familiar and comfortable setting of a barbershop to facilitate open and honest discussions. By capturing real conversations and experiences, the film has helped to highlight the importance of breaking the silence around men's mental well-being, encouraging more men to speak up and seek support.

7. Men evolving themselves and the community

The project that I work on 'Making it Happen' (MiH) has seen significant ripples from the emergence of activity developed by and with men.

Individuals and groups that I have supported through MiH have connected with MrH&SL, and in turn individuals from MrH&SL have helped me with MiH filming and practicalities.

The groups that have crossed over both projects in particular are Project Rewild, Craig's Cabin, Head on Board, the Bike Project, Only Men (AOP) Progress Network and Hastings Men's Network.

A big change I have witnessed generally is that MrH&SL are very present. Conversations around the topic of 'what it is to be a man in Hastings' are commonplace at community events, actively engaging new men and women into the conversations.

Men are coming forward from every part of the town including those with diverse backgrounds and from less well served parts of the town. Young men are being included through projects and those projects in turn feel valued and supported to develop the work that they are doing to improve health, wellbeing, and for providing young men with direction towards employment (Head on Board – Matt.)

The ability of the project to connect men with each other either through projects or via individual skills, experience and assets has been truly organic. Friendships have blossomed and the self-confidence of individuals who feel a part of something significant has been apparent with those men stepping forward offering their time and skills for ongoing activities.

At a community level, organisations have begun to think about how to engage with men differently; in terms of understanding that encouraging men to volunteer may require a different engagement method and conversation to one you may have with a woman.

The men involved with MrH&SL are all discovering different skills and knowledge about themselves, understanding themselves better and how they

and the project could help to change 'unhelpful' male behaviour in relation to women, misogyny and societal power imbalance.

The men I have contact with in the project are very thoughtful about their impact on their families and in their relationships. The project has acted as a 'safe space' to be a masculine man and all that may be.

I have also heard conversations about the experience of men in relation to the NHS and GP/primary care etc. I feel that those men feel more knowledgeable and empowered to see their GP if they have an issue now.

The project has increased the understanding of social impact and many of the men feel able to have conversations with employers etc to get more involved in generic community activity.

What made it so significant?

MrH&SL is a significant project in that it is evidencing that using an Asset Based Community Development approach has really enabled the men participating to evolve themselves and the project organically.

Through enabling meaningful and regular communication between commissioners, managers and men, the project workers have been able to listen to and act with the men to try out approaches and activities that would never have occurred if planned using a more 'traditional' approach to engagement. Accepting that some initiatives are more successful than others helps the men understand how best to develop future plans, and to find ways to sustain their activities.

They have now set up a CIC to help sustain the ongoing work of the project, they wouldn't have felt able to do this without the experience of the previous activities.

The willingness of Commissioners and managers to follow the men's energy has enabled some amazing undertakings; including men performing on stage, on radio and in film. Helping to co-produce an application to bring the 'Baton of Hope' to Hastings would never have been in a delivery plan! Well done to all the believers.

8. Men engaging in conversations about mental health

For me, the single most significant change has been in the way men in the community have been engaging with the conversation around men's mental health - and mental health in general.

The longer the Men's Room has been going, people have started to say: 'Oh yes, I've heard of that', or 'Oh yeah, so-and-so said something about that' and so people have started to actively get help for themselves – or to make suggestions about what we can do, or ask for advice on how to get someone else to get help. It's very community-based and conversational, but we do also know that GP practices have also referred people, STARS rehab support, the NHS or others such as that.

An example of the ripples working would be through The Grumpy Cook sessions, for example – the Grumpy Men's club. There was one guy who came down to that and you know the way you can see a change in someone, in the way they hold themselves and interact with the world? Through a small number of interactions, you could see he'd made a profound change in his life. He'd felt there was no hope, no support or prospect of anything and then found himself in a place where he was actively discussing and embracing things he'd never thought he'd be able to talk about. He embraced the methodology and shared it with other people. That's the ripple right there – we caught him, he's catching other people, and they are connecting with others. It's movement at a local level: we've captured people on an individual level, others have become aware of what we're doing and are more comfortable talking with other people about it.

Another example of this beyond Hastings and St Leonards is a guy came to our Talk Club session and the experience resonated with him so well that he asked do I know of anything happening in another area that could be recommended to a friend living there. I did a search so that I could recommend something – it's not about selfishly hoarding knowledge, it is about opening out and supporting people.

In the barber's a couple of months ago I'd started a chat with a random guy there. He said that what we were doing was incredible – that people were now supported to share about their challenges. The very fact that this all exists as a concept – let alone a CIC now – gives a message of hope to people. It gives them the opportunity to know that 'It's okay to not be okay'. That's the message that we're propagating. People are running with it – and you can see that when you think about what is being collectively achieved: 'Baton of Hope', 'Project Rewild', 'Take Action Man', and guys who have secured funding for their arts initiatives through the Men's Room CIC to grow their work. We're about creating communities to support communities – it's something beautiful, a machine of hope in an otherwise hopeless world.

We're giving men – and people in general – a strong message that it's okay to talk about it. If you're feeling crap today – it's okay. It moves us away from the stiff upper lip, male machismo, 'men don't cry', 'men don't talk' aspect – it's allowed us to push forward and make movement to show that's a bogus way of thinking, and that there's a lot of strength in that perceived weakness.

What made it so significant?

We're breaking barriers and building connections wherever we can. People are connecting and that's having an impact at a community and a system level.

The hardest part of all this is how difficult it is to pinpoint success. I won't know what impact my conversation will have unless they tell me there and then, or if I ever get any feedback.

The overarching message is hope. I do know that it offers hope to people. Hope, connection, engagement, community, resonance.

I always say that if I can help one person by sharing my personal history of trauma, of addiction, that makes everything that I lived through worthwhile, but what I'm seeing is more than that. This work is about more than that. It's engaging and creating a sense of empathy and understanding within the community where people are less likely to look down on those who are struggling and more likely to look down with an outstretched hand and say 'Here, can I help you?'

If Men's Room achieves one legacy, the increased conversation and enhanced sense of community spirit and understanding is it.

9. Perceived shift in commissioning

Over the nearly three years I have been in the role of Project Manager for Mr H&SL I have experienced/witnessed a significant change in understanding, and the value placed, on an Asset Based Community Development approach by Public Health Commissioners.

This has led to a change in how conversations around commissioning of future community-based health initiatives are being approached.

Specifically, this has led to conversations about potential funding for a rollout of men's health and wellbeing work in East Sussex.

These conversations are now beginning with asking us what we feel would work, and with a commitment from ESCC Commissioners to maintaining the key elements of the Mr H&SL approach that has led to its success.

We have worked in partnership with our ESCC Public Health Commissioners to ensure that:

- Our delivery meets ESCC's expectations/needs (accountability) whilst also
- Maintaining an authentic Asset Based Community Development Approach.

This is made possible through:

- A host agency (HVA) and management structure commitment to supporting an Asset Based Community Development approach.
- The strong working relationship built between the HVA team, ESCC Public Health Commissioner and external evaluators Apteligen appointed in year two of delivery.
- Professional relationships, built on honesty and trust, and located within a learning environment where there is transparency around both successes and challenges.
- The agreement with ESCC Public Health Commissioners that no formal KPI's would be identified, allowing Mr Hastings and St Leonard's to follow the energy of men within the community.

- The HVA team ensuring accountability was maintained by sharing diverse examples of impact, being visible/ present at events, partnership groups and networking opportunities, and having a 'can-do' approach when asked for information, evidence of impact, examples of delivery and representation.

This approach reflects the strapline we have adopted, and have consistently reinforced, which is, "Step back, be brave and trust the process".

The process we refer to is Asset Based Community Development, and step back and be brave refers to the HVA team as practitioners and our ESCC commissioners as funders and decision makers.

Feedback from HVA's Director is that the ripple effect of Mr H&SL, and the Making it Happen Programme who we work closely with, is that conversations around future delivery and commissioning of services are now often reflecting this experience.

What made it so significant?

I have identified this as a significant change as this is not a traditional, or easy approach, for Public Health commissioners to take at a time when there is ever increasing pressure on limited resources.

As I highlighted at our recent Steering Group meeting

"We couldn't have done things in this way if we hadn't had a commissioner who was open to looking at things differently, doing things differently, measuring things differently and who trusted us. We have had an amazing opportunity, and it was clear at the last coproduction event that we attended that this isn't everyone's experience across the region. Not everyone has this open, honest and trusting, relationship with their commissioners."

We feel this is very special, and an important change to record.

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10. Authentic and consistent collaboration

For me the most significant change has been to see the development of an authentic collaboration between the men of the project and the impact this has had.

The involvement of participants at all stages of the project branding and initial ideas has been consistent, and this has led to a recognition that the project is in the hands of the beneficiaries.

In terms of wider systems change I think the visibility of the project and the different ways it has found to convey its message has strengthened the understanding within public health and East Sussex County Council of the potential for asset-based working. This has been seen not just within the management of the Mr Hastings and St Leonards contract, but on other areas too.

What made it so significant?

I think the reputation of the men's work has opened a bit of a pathway to embracing a more long-term outcome rather than output culture, and the adoption by East Sussex County Council of more of an asset-based perspective. I also think that some partners found the events quite revelatory and powerful as a way of looking at concepts like community resilience and activism.

I think the project and the participants within it are an authentic expression of real people and real lives and this shines through the project.

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CREATIVE PARTNERSHIPS



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HVA
Hastings Voluntary Action

East Sussex
County Council



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