REAL IDEAS
PROFILE
EMPOWERING PLACES

September 2023

Renaisi

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power to change | business in community hands

COMMUNITY FUND

ABOUT **POWER TO CHANGE**

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Power to Change is the independent trust that strengthens communities through community business. We use our experience to bring partners together to fund, grow and back community business to make places thrive. We are curious and rigorous; we do, test and learn. And we are here to support community business, whatever the challenge.

ABOUT **RENAISI**

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Renaisi is a social enterprise that helps people and places thrive by challenging the root causes of economic and social exclusion across the UK. They do this by empowering people to overcome barriers to employment, enabling social and private sector organisations to tackle socio-economic exclusion, challenging systems that perpetuate exclusion, and embodying approaches that lead to sustainable change.
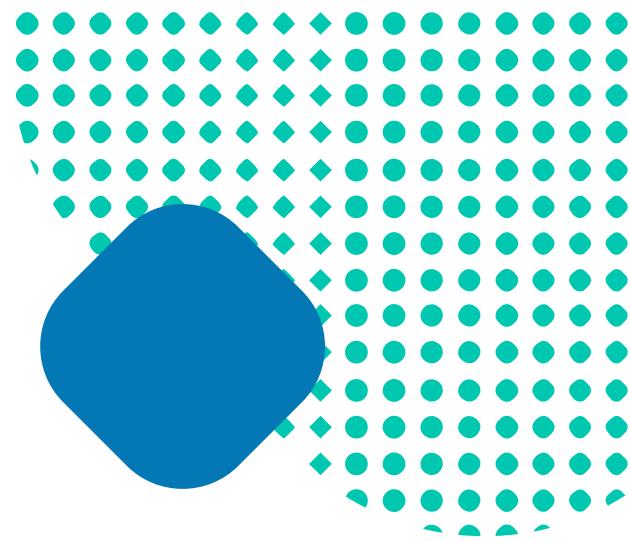
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INTRODUCTION

Empowering Places was designed by Power to Change as an experiment to explore what happens when local anchor organisations are supported to catalyse community businesses in deprived communities in England.[1],[2]

The programme took much of what Power to Change knew about supporting the development of community businesses in other programmes. It applied this to a place, considering how the interplay between place, people and community businesses could build more resilient and prosperous communities.

The programme hypothesised that building the capacity of specific, existing local organisations could enable them to catalyse and support the growth of new community businesses. In turn, these community businesses would support and develop the social economy of their communities. The programme provided a blend of funding and capacity-building support to locally rooted 'catalyst' organisations in six areas of high deprivation to test this idea:[3]

- B-inspired in Braunstone, Leicester

- Centre4 in Nunsthorpe and Bradley Park, Grimsby

- Made in Manningham, incubated by Participate in Manningham, Bradford[4]

- Real Ideas in Devonport and Stonehouse, Plymouth

- The Wharton Trust in Dyke House, Hartlepool

- Wigan and Leigh Community Charity (WLCC), formally Abram Ward Community Cooperative, in Abram, Wigan

Power to Change's decision to invest in these places was a choice to support and empower local people to shape delivery based on local priorities, meaning the context and the realities of each place play a significant part of how the programme looks and feels in those areas.

This profile for Real Ideas, Plymouth, is one in a series of six and draws on data and insight from the beginning of the programme (July 2017) to January 2023, including:

- the socio-economic context of Devonport and Stonehouse, and Plymouth more broadly, drawing on publicly available datasets and findings from research on the area

- monitoring data from the programme and feedback from qualitative interviews with Power to Change, delivery partners, catalyst staff and community businesses

- information about the catalyst – Real Ideas – and its Empowering Places journey.[5]

This profile is designed to tell the story of the Empowering Places investment in Devonport and Stonehouse in Plymouth. Together with the other five profiles in the suite, it helps to build a picture of the similarities and differences in context and approaches across the Empowering Places areas.
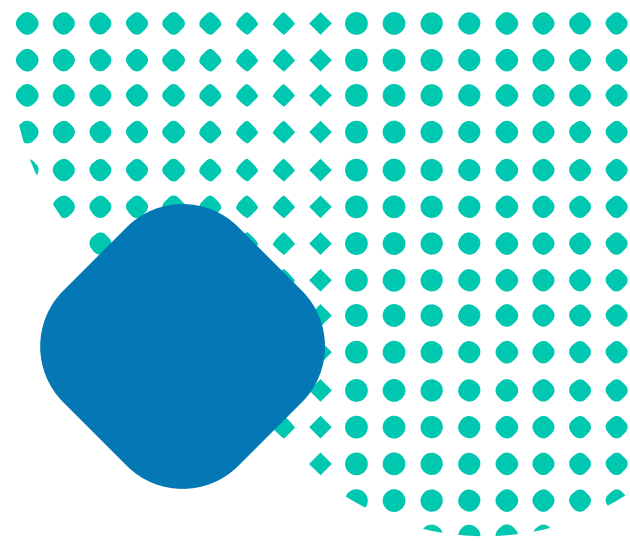
EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

Real Ideas Organisation CIC (Real Ideas) was set up in 2007 to support social enterprise and develop innovative projects across Plymouth, the South West and beyond. The organisation has considerable experience of taking on and redeveloping assets, setting up businesses and running educational programmes.

This profile explores the social, economic and demographic context of Devonport and Stonehouse in Plymouth; Real Ideas' approach to delivering Empowering Places and the programme's impact on the catalyst, community businesses and wider community; and how the legacy of Empowering Places has shaped the catalyst's future ambitions.

Key points:

- Real Ideas has developed and supported more community businesses than the other catalysts in the programme and has taken a differential approach to support, in some cases providing support through the Real Ideas team, in others through local delivery partners who bring different skills and experience to the process.

- Real Ideas' collaborative approach to delivering Empowering Places has allowed it to use its extensive local connections and local delivery partners to identify potential community business opportunities and to tailor the support it provides its community businesses to their specific needs.

- The Empowering Places programme has increased Real Ideas' capacity to work with community businesses, shifted the organisation's thinking more towards community business and helped it develop its already strong local and national relationships.

- There is evidence that Empowering Places has enabled the initiation or development of a range of community businesses in Plymouth and that Real Ideas has given community groups the necessary tools and frameworks to develop.

- Some of the community businesses are also having a clear impact on their immediate communities – this ranges from engaging local communities in activities through to offering skills and development opportunities and supporting the improvement of the local area so that more people want to use it.

- Staff at Real Ideas feel that Empowering Places has helped to create a set of building blocks that can now be used to develop work in a range of areas including skills and employment for young people, improving parks and green spaces, business support and community ownership.

- There is a mixed outlook for the community businesses that Real Ideas has supported; some are set to thrive while others are likely to struggle more, but the future of community business in the city looks strong and Empowering Places has contributed to the momentum that the city has built.

1.
GUIDE TO SOURCES
OF **DATA AND INSIGHT**

The English Indices of Deprivation, managed by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, provide a comprehensive measure of relative deprivation in small areas or neighbourhoods called lower-layer super output areas (LSOAs) in England. The Index of Multiple Deprivation is based on 39 separate indicators organised across seven domains of deprivation. The domains are combined and weighted to produce an overall measure of multiple deprivation experienced by people living in an area. Every LSOA in England is ranked based on their level of deprivation relative to other areas.[6]

Local Insight is a hub for place-based neighbourhood level data to help decision-makers in organisations working for social good. It is provided by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (OCSI), a spin-out consultancy from Oxford University, and holds more than 1,000 neighbourhood level indicators drawing together social, economic and demographic data from more than 50 sources.[7]

The Thriving Places Index draws on a broad range of indicators in public sector datasets measuring key factors that influence wellbeing. The index is managed by the not-for-profit place-based consultancy the Centre for Thriving Places, and provides a comparative 'dashboard' of measures under three broad categories – local conditions, equality and sustainability – with a more detailed breakdown of factors driving the distinctive local experience.[8]

Place Analytics distils thousands of datasets on people, businesses, markets and the environment, providing insight into the performance of places and the levers that fundamentally affect them. It is provided by specialist business advisors Grant Thornton UK to help organisations across all sectors contribute to building a vibrant economy, by creating places where people and businesses can flourish.[9]

UK Social Fabric Index maps community strength in different parts of the UK, and is produced by Onward – a non-profit think tank supported by Power to Change. The index analyses data in four categories – economic value, relationships, positive norms and physical infrastructure – each drawing on several comparative measures of local community experience.[10]

The programme evaluation took a realist approach to understanding impact and what has contributed to it, focusing on the experiences of those involved. It drew mainly on interviews and video ethnography with catalysts, community businesses, tech leads and stakeholders in the local areas, and interviews with programme delivery leads at Power to Change and Co-operatives UK. Researchers tracked relevant findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of the development and impact of the programme.

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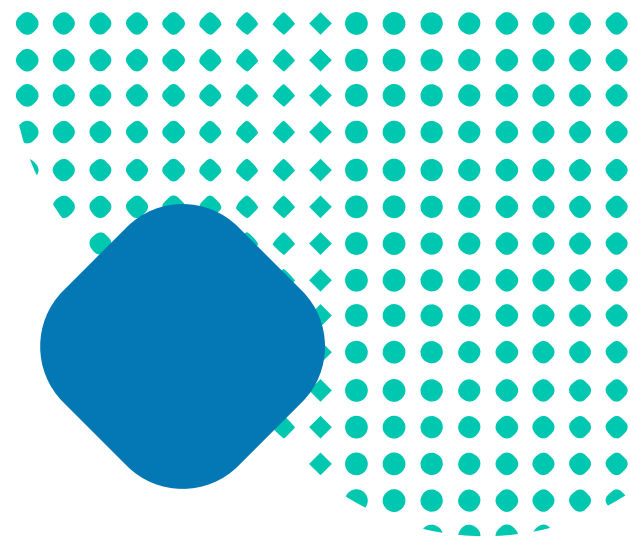
2.
DEVONPORT AND STONEHOUSE, PLYMOUTH

2.1 Context

The Devonport and Stonehouse areas lie to the west of Plymouth, within close reach of the city centre. Devonport and Stonehouse are two of three towns that were amalgamated into modern-day Plymouth. Both areas have connections to Plymouth's naval and maritime history. Devonport has a naval dock yard, train station and sports ground. Stonehouse hosts an international ferry port, a yacht-building works and a college.

Plymouth was selected as one of the places within the Empowering Places programme for a variety of reasons. It has an Index of Multiple Deprivation average score rank of 64 and has at least one neighbourhood in the 10 per cent most deprived areas in the country.[11]

Local insight [12]	
Population	**16,743**
Household income, after housing costs **England average: £27,311**	**£19,130**
White British (%) **England: 79.8%**	**89.5%**
Age under 25 (%) **England: 31%**	**32.7%**
Age 65+ (%) **England: 18.2%**	**12.1%**

Power to Change

Thriving Places Index (town)[13]	Plymouth
Health equality e.g. life expectancy at birth	6.43
Mental and physical health e.g. child obesity rate, conceptions in under 18s, illness and disability, prevalence of depression, anxiety and other health indicators	3.68
Education and learning e.g. adults with no qualifications, life-long learning, educational attainment of children, childcare quality and school readiness	5.19
Work and local economy e.g. income deprivation affecting different sections of the population, employment and percentage with low income	3.01
Place and environment local environment, housing, transport and safety, e.g. green land cover, air pollution, journey times to key services, housing affordability ratio and crime severity index	5.37
Subjective happiness Life satisfaction scores from Measures of National Well-being Dashboard: Quality of Life in the UK (ONS)	7.4

Index scores range from 0 to 10. Scores are colour coded to reflect how an area scores compared with others in England, with higher scores indicating that a place is doing better in that domain.

Key: ● Very low (below 3.5) ● Below average (3.5–4.5) ● Medium (4.5–5.5)
● Above average (5.5–6.5) ● Very high (above 6.5)

Local authority area compared with England average[14]	Plymouth
Housing affordability	60%–80%
Community assets	80%–100%
Employment rate (age 16–64)	20%–40%
Business formation	60%–80%
Happiness and wellbeing	20%–40%

Each category is benchmarked using multiple measures and scored (in percentile form) relative to other catalyst areas. The higher the score, the better the place performed.

Percentile key: ● 80–100% Very high ● 60–80% High ● 40–60% Above average ● 20–40% Average
● 5–20% Low ● <5% Very low

UK Social Fabric Index[15]						
Local authority	**Social fabric score**	**Relationship score**	**Physical infrastructure**	**Civic institutions**	**Economic value**	**Positive social norms**
Plymouth	0.45	0.30	0.53	0.46	0.49	0.47
Hartlepool	0.37	0.24	0.48	0.38	0.44	0.33
North East Lincolnshire	0.38	0.27	0.50	0.38	0.40	0.36
Leicester	0.42	0.21	0.59	0.49	0.36	0.45
Bradford	0.43	0.28	0.58	0.43	0.43	0.43
Wigan	0.46	0.33	0.57	0.45	0.53	0.45

Scores are graded from zero to one, with those closer to one indicating the stronger social fabric.

Social fabric score: strength of social fabric across all five threads: relationship, physical infrastructure, civic institutions, economic value and positive social norms

Relationship score: clusters of social groups of people in communities and community-owned assets

Physical infrastructure: physical assets in communities which facilitate, structure and organise people within a community

Civic institutions: health of democracy and governance at both local and national level, considering quality, trust and satisfaction

Economic value: tangible assets which hold a monetary and/or economic value to an individual or family within a community

Positive social norms: personal wellbeing and cultural attitudes of individuals and families in a community, including people's wider habits, behaviours and activities

Key: The colour coding reflects the comparative performance of each place in each category. The highest score for each category is dark green, the lowest is dark red.

Community

A Power to Change survey of local people in Devonport and Stonehouse in 2020 found that people like where they live and report a high level of satisfaction with local services. Over three-quarters (79%) are very or fairly satisfied with their area and a similar proportion (80%) are satisfied with local services.[16]

Four in ten (41%) of people said they would 'borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours', compared with 29 per cent in a matched comparison area; this has also risen by 10 per cent since 2018.[17]

Challenges

Between 2018 and 2020 the perception of the local area worsened, from 37 per cent having felt the area had got better in 2018, to only 25 per cent still believing that in 2020. People were also less satisfied with local services and loneliness grew a little from 2018 (30%) to 2020 (33%), and was more widespread than in a matched comparison area (26%).

Voluntary and community sector

Turnover data is available for 500 voluntary and community sector organisations in Plymouth in the 2020/21 financial year, the fullest recent year. The combined turnover of these organisations was £382 million.[18]

Small to medium-sized organisations with a turnover between £5,000 and £5 million are most relevant to the programme, as these are the organisations that Empowering Places catalyst organisations are most likely to partner with or influence in their local area. Of the total number of organisations for which turnover data is available from 2020/21, 403 were in this category and had a combined turnover of £105.4 million, accounting for 27.5 per cent of the total £382 million turnover.[19]

Profitability data for 485 non-profits in Plymouth in the 2020/21 financial year demonstrates that 39.7 per cent of organisations experienced a loss. The following chart shows turnover by sector in 2020/21 – social services, with 135 organisations, had the highest turnover at £149.2 million, followed by community, employment and housing with 64 organisations and a turnover of £102.6 million.[20]

Turnover by sector in Plymouth in 2020/21[21]

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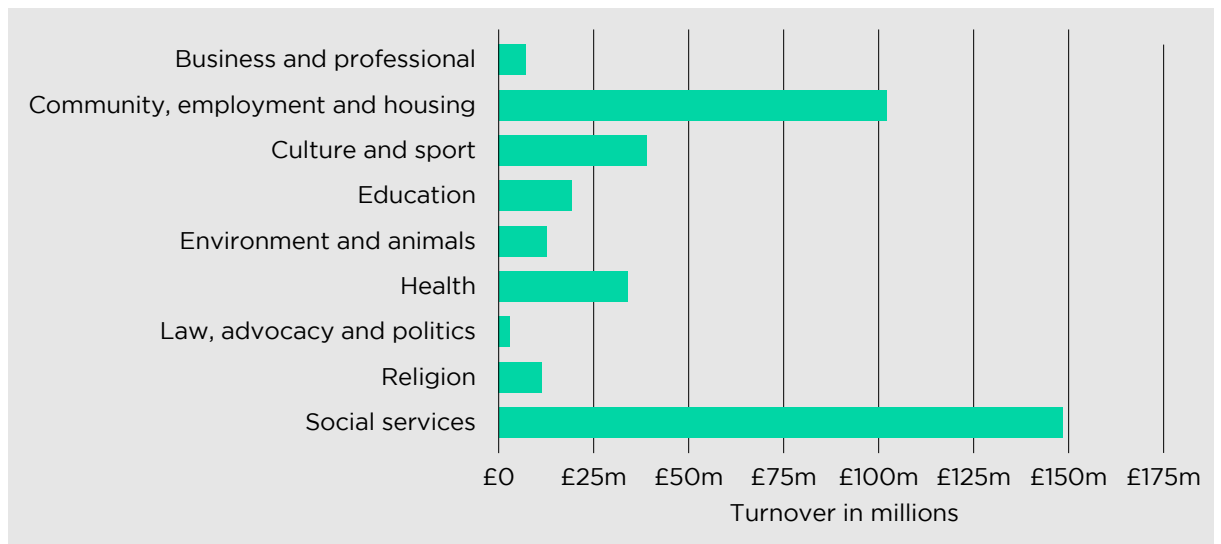
Grant funding in Plymouth by sector in 2020/21[22]
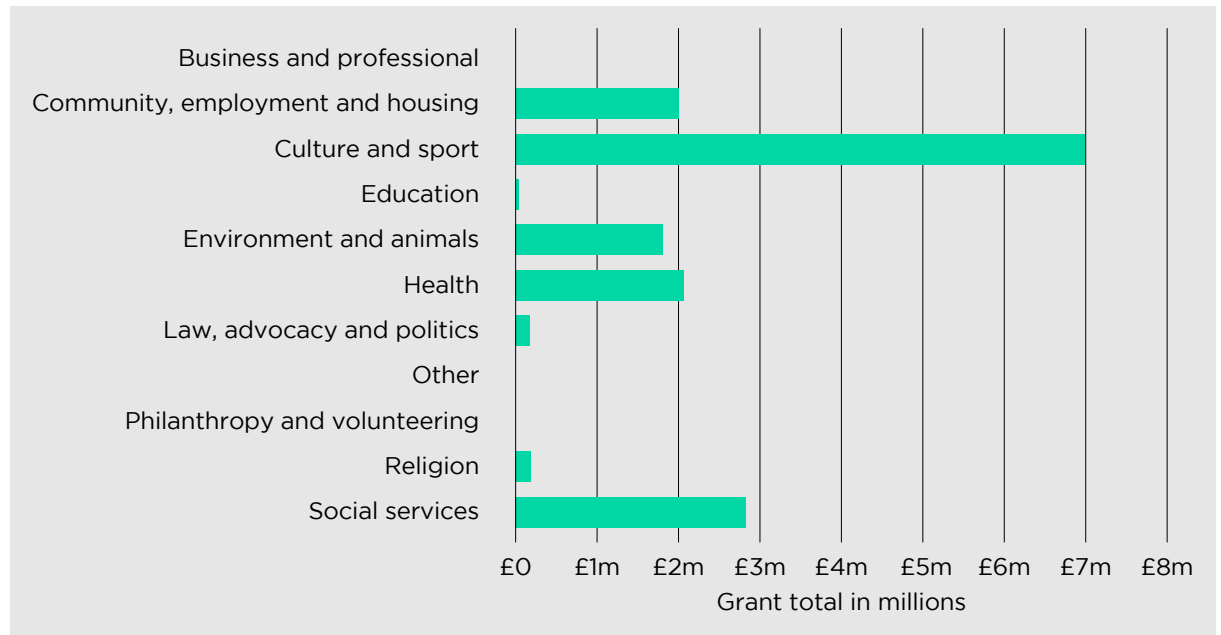
Funding landscape

In 2020/2021, Plymouth received a total of £16.1 million in grant funding representing 0.3 per cent of national grant funding provided that year. The above chart depicts grant funding in Plymouth by sector in 2020/21, where culture and sport received the most.[23]

The following table gives an overview of the funding landscape in Plymouth, based on the available data.

Funding	Plymouth[24]
Top five significant charitable funders and amounts between 2017–2022	The National Lottery Community Fund (£11.3 million)
	The National Lottery Heritage Fund (£3.2 million)
	Esmée Fairbairn Foundation (£2.6 million)
	Wolfson Foundation (£2.5 million)
	Sport England (£2.3 million)
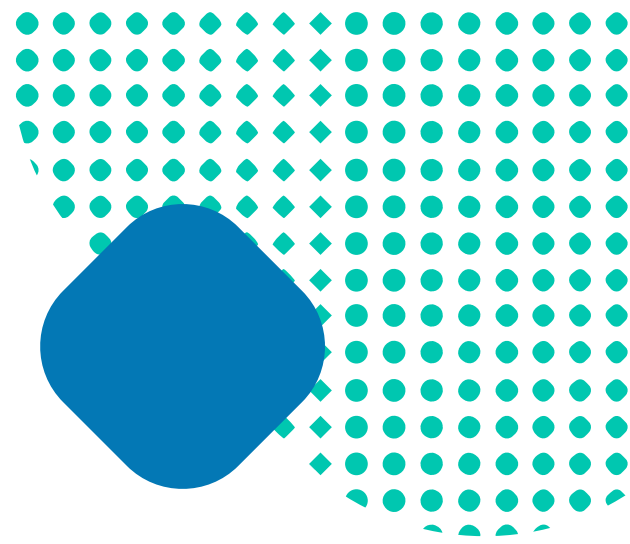
3.
EMPOWERING PLACES
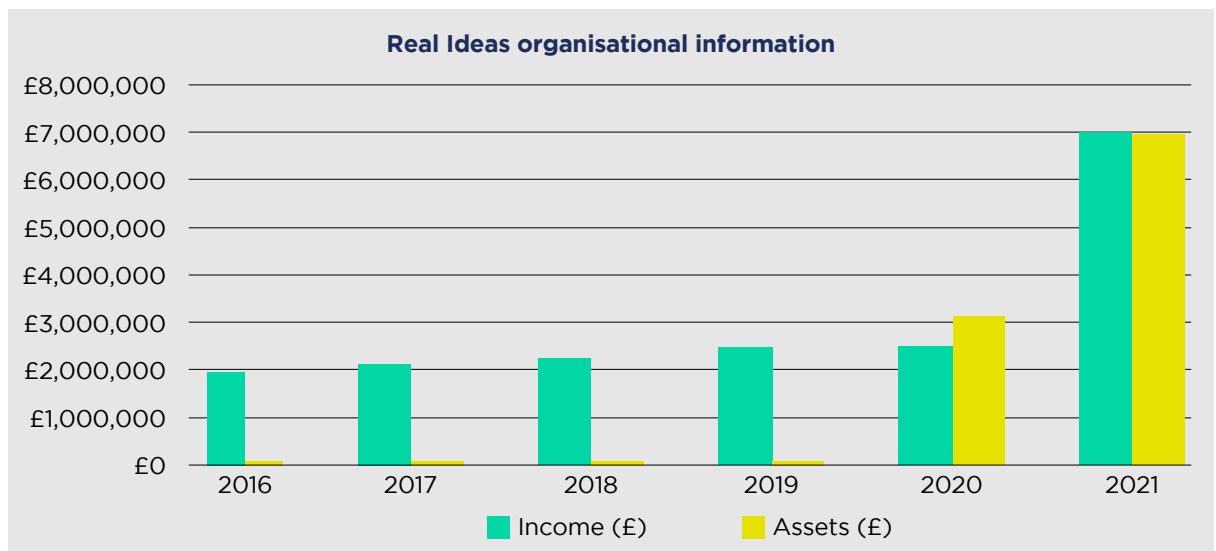# **CATALYST: REAL IDEAS**

3.1 About the catalyst

Real Ideas Organisation CIC (Real Ideas) was set up in 2007 to support social enterprise and develop innovative projects across Plymouth, the South West and beyond. It has extensive experience of taking on and redeveloping assets (such as the Devonport Guildhall and Market Hall), setting up businesses and running educational programmes. It provides affordable and flexible office space for SMEs to grow and develop, and capacity building support for community businesses.

In addition to the community business support programme funded by Empowering Places, Real Ideas also provides support for under 25s, is the Arts Council's Bridge organisation for the South West and has several spaces including studios for hire by local artists and creative businesses. Real Ideas also manages the Enrich and Green Minds programmes which focus on how social enterprise and community business thinking can be used to find positive solutions to sustaining Plymouth's parks, and aim to encourage nature-based solutions respectively.

Real Ideas had a total income of £7,003,163 and assets worth £6,960,068, making them the largest organisation on the programme.[25] In 2022, they reported having 56 staff.

Real Ideas organisational information

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Income (£)	~1,950,000	~2,100,000	~2,250,000	~2,450,000	~2,450,000	~7,000,000
Assets (£)	~100,000	~100,000	~100,000	~100,000	~3,100,000	~6,950,000

3.2 Empowering Places delivery

A legacy for the Empowering Places programme

Real Ideas' five-year plan sets out its ambitions that entrepreneurialism is encouraged, and that wealth is generated sustainably and stays in the area to improve the quality of life for all. It aims for everyone to have access to meaningful work – work that they can see makes a difference to their community, the environment and the world; and that community business and wider social entrepreneurial approaches are seen as commonplace careers for all.

By the end of the programme, Real Ideas aimed to have a growing community business and social enterprise ecology centred on Plymouth's commitment to inclusive growth and green recovery. An inclusive growth strategy has been adopted by the Plymouth Growth Board, committing Plymouth City Council, the business community and the third sector to innovate; develop new approaches that reduce inequality; build wealth in communities; and in doing so work with, and for, the natural local environment. These ambitions were given even greater priority and vitality through the city's Resurgam: COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan. Real Ideas is also aiming to develop an inclusive growth leadership programme, bringing together a cohort from the private, public and third sector, including community business leaders.

Finally, Real Ideas aims to continue being a part of a city that is increasingly well networked and resilient, with a business ecology that takes community businesses seriously and sees the value of diverse business models that build local wealth and create benefit for all.

Approach to delivering Empowering Places

Aims of Empowering Places locally Real Ideas' approach to delivering Empowering Places focused on how it would catalyse transformational change through creating a sustainable pipeline of connected activity at both a grassroots and strategic level. It was also focused on finding ways to bring more local assets into community hands and on encouraging local entrepreneurs to come together to develop businesses that addressed local issues and need.

Empowering Places within the catalyst organisation

The focus and ethos of the Empowering Places programme were well aligned with Real Ideas as an organisation, which describes itself as being 'catalytic' and which has long worked with local organisations to help them strengthen and connect within the community. Real Ideas staff felt that the fit with Empowering Places was greater than with programmes they have been involved with in the past, which aligned with perhaps only 80 per cent of their values and so felt less comfortable to work with.

Where Empowering Places represented a slight departure for Real Ideas is that the programme focused solely on community businesses, while Real Ideas' itself tends not to differentiate between types of businesses that are delivering social good and has an equal focus on social and creative enterprises. This means that, within the programme, Real Ideas worked only with community businesses; but working outside Empowering Places, it offered similar support to organisations with a social purpose but different delivery models.

Approach to delivering the programme

The Empowering Places evaluation has identified three key approaches that catalysts have taken to developing community businesses – incubation, community-led and individual entrepreneurialism. Real Ideas has largely adopted an individual entrepreneurialism approach; encouraging local individuals to come to them with ideas that that they think would benefit the community. They have termed their approach as 'open door', making it clear to the Devonport and Stonehouse communities that they are available to listen to and support ideas, and connect groups who they feel have the potential to develop something.

This focus on individual entrepreneurism has also included supporting community businesses with asset acquisition to enable sustainability, and Real Ideas has used its expertise in this area to help transfer more local assets into community hands through the programme.

Real Ideas has worked with more community businesses than other catalysts in the programme. It took a differential approach to support, tailoring it to the individual organisations it worked with and the stage that they were at in their development. Some of this support was being provided directly by Real Ideas itself while some was provided by delivery partners (including Nudge Community Builders and Iridescent Ideas) that Real Ideas had subcontracted to help it to deliver the programme locally.

The community businesses that Real Ideas supported are fairly disparate, both in geographical location and in focus. Several already existed in some form before connecting with Real Ideas or the Empowering Places programme, while most have been developed as a result of the programme. Real Ideas is very well established and connected within the local area. Therefore, alongside its 'open door' approach which encouraged local individuals and groups to come to them, Real Ideas was able to use its connections and collaborations to identify potential community businesses which it then supported via a combination of in-house Empowering Places team support and/or through one of its delivery partners.

Where Real Ideas provided more direct support, this varied hugely in both intensity and focus. As well as helping with business planning and set up, Real Ideas had a strong emphasis on using its local networks to help connect the developing businesses, for example linking them with other similar businesses, with other emerging community businesses for peer support or with organisations that might be able to provide other support or funding.

The main delivery partners that Real Ideas worked with during the programme – Nudge and Iridescent Ideas – both brought different types of support to the catalyst process and so extended Real Ideas' offer to community businesses. Nudge is itself a community benefit society (and one of the community businesses that Real Ideas supported early on in the programme) and was set up to bring empty buildings in Stonehouse back into use. As an Empowering Places delivery partner, Nudge worked directly with several of the supported community businesses, drawing on its own experience as a community business to provide mentoring. It provided support on governance and legal structure as well as working with the developing businesses to help them enhance their profile in the local area. Iridescent Ideas is a community interest company which provides business support for community business, social enterprise, cooperatives and charities. It worked with a small number of the Stonehouse and Devonport community businesses, supporting them on governance and legal structure, impact and business development, including helping them to register and to think about their future structure, vision and mission.

Relationships and levels of influence

Real Ideas has a wide network of both national and local organisations and evidence from the evaluation, including interviews with local stakeholders, suggests that Real Ideas' relationships has been one of its biggest assets in the programme. It is well known within Plymouth on a number of levels and has been able to connect the developing community businesses not only with other relevant individuals and groups, but with other potential funding sources.

3.3 Support and funding

The following chart provides a breakdown of Real Ideas' spend across the programme.[26] Staff costs includes the cost of freelance support, and internal costs includes office rental, equipment, travel, subsistence, marketing, communications and events.

Impact of the capacity support

Real Ideas' views of the support that it needed for its community businesses inevitably shifted as the programme developed. When Empowering Places started, Real Ideas found that it took a while to understand both what capacity support was available and what worked best for the team and the community businesses they were working with. Community business wasn't a commonly understood concept for the people and communities in Devonport and Stonehouse, and in some ways was something additional for people to get used to. This required a greater focus on communications, learning and advocacy activity in the initial stages of the programme before a community understanding and a working community business pipeline developed.

Real Ideas programme spend

Capacity provider support costs	~£100,000
Grant to community businesses	~£50,000
Revenue operating costs	~£640,000

Scale: £0, £200,000, £400,000, £600,000, £800,000

"
In the first two years, there was really quite a lot of trying stuff out and getting stuff going, and it's really only once things are going that you work out exactly what they need, and they have a development plan that you can start pulling stuff in.
Delivery partner

As a catalyst, Real Ideas liked the idea of the support provider pool and the way that it has developed over time to become more tailored and flexible, and found they made more use of it as the programme went on. However, particularly at the early stage, Real Ideas found support was best provided directly by its own team or delivery partners, and that the need for the sorts of wider support that can be found within the provider pool came later.

"
I think our experience generally is that people need a lot of support but they sort of need it from somebody they know.
Delivery partner

To some extent, the Real Ideas team also feels as though some of the support on offer through the provider pool was more generic and geographically based elsewhere. They were more inclined to access the support provided by Empowering Places when it was focused on more specific sector skills and knowledge that isn't immediately available through local contacts.

Real Ideas had a very good relationship with its programme tech lead and valued the fact that she was local, nationally connected and had additional skills to draw on while supporting Real Ideas. Real Ideas staff have also highly valued the peer support that the programme offered, both through informal channels and at more formal interactions such as the learning camps.

"
It's been really brilliant actually working with the other catalysts … sort of understanding the way they do things and the way they operate and seeing a diversity, a different approach and also then having some sort of peer affirmation that we're doing stuff that's kind of right or even we're wrestling with the same issues.
Delivery partner

Impact of Empowering Places

Impact on Real Ideas

Evidence from Real Ideas staff and delivery partners suggests that the Empowering Places programme has had an impact on Real Ideas as an organisation in three key ways.

First, it increased the organisation's capacity, both in terms of time and skills, to work with community businesses. Real Ideas is the largest of the catalysts in the programme and already did a lot of work to support local groups and businesses, but the programme has expanded the organisation's reach and meant that it had more resources to offer them:

"
It's enabled us to focus on and grow and support the growth of a bunch of organisations and community businesses that we would otherwise have struggled to help.
Delivery Partner

Having the extra capacity and community business focus has also meant that Real Ideas has become embedded in local conversations and pieces of work that it may not have done otherwise.

Second, being a part of the programme has resulted in a slight shift in the organisation's thinking. While Real Ideas might have delivered similar activities if it had not taken part, it would not have had such a specific focus on community ownership and community business as a structure. Real Ideas is organisationally agnostic about social business structures, and instead aims to be customer focused and client led. However, the Power to Change brief gave Real Ideas the opportunity to focus on and work with community businesses specifically in a way that it had not before.

Finally, the programme has had an impact on the organisation's partnerships and collaborations. Real Ideas is very well networked as an organisation, but being a part of the programme has given it the opportunity to strengthen some of its existing relationships and create new ones. Staff and delivery partners interviewed reflected on the fact that, while partnerships are one of Real Ideas' key strengths and the organisation is active in many local conversations, being a part of the programme has given Real Ideas staff more agency in some of their relationships. Staff have also welcomed the opportunity to develop new relationships with organisations like Co-operatives UK, CLES and NEF (delivery partners for the Empowering Places programme), both specifically on the programme and in a more strategic way.

Impact on the community and wider place

Community businesses supported by the catalyst

Community business name	Community business purpose
Kings Road Brewery, Trading as Borrowed Parts Brew Co.	A community micro-brewery brewing beer with local produce, including waste bread, to support culture, environment and good jobs
Cliik Community Limited (grew out of Friends of Wyndam Square)	A community space offering a range of support for local residents combining environmental, housing, employment and quality of life initiatives to regenerate north Stonehouse
Column Community Event	Provides local events for the community
Devon and Cornwall Furniture Reuse	Provides reused furniture and supportive social space
Jabulani/Diversity Business Incubator (DBI)	Multi-cultural food court supporting local food enterprises, that emerged from the Diversity Business Incubator (DBI)
KARST	Community arts and culture venue
Nudge Community Builders, inc. Millennium	Creative community-led programmes to improve public spaces and places and connect people; leading the community ownership and regeneration of multiple buildings on Union Street
Pembroke Estate Management Board (PEMB)	Longstanding resident community-led property and tenant management organisation regenerating a local housing estate
Pollenize	Introducing network of community apiaries (beehive sites) to high profile buildings in the centre of urban communities to reverse pollinator decline and increase biodiversity
Red Velvet Cinema	Fortnightly community cinema events for older people, with classic films, tea, cake and conversation at Devonport Guildhall, to help reduce social isolation
Scrapstore	Community recycling centre promoting play through craft and sustainability
Snapdragons Plymouth	A group of parents who offer an alternative for children's creative and environmental education and learning
St Saviours	A disused church, not in the Devonport and Stonehouse area but supporting wider place outcomes
Soapbox Theatre (Stiltskin)	Community children's theatre, based in a regenerated wartime mustard gas decontamination centre, now also developing the grounds surrounding the theatre
Stonehouse Voice	Community news publication for Stonehouse and wider printing and publications

Community business name	Community business purpose
Street Factory	Use all elements of hip hop – fostering economic development and transforming lives for young people and families from their community hub in Stonehouse
The Firestone Society	Community run rehabilitation service, providing high quality supported housing in and around Plymouth for people recovering from addiction. Currently purchasing the property they have been renting, through community shares and a council loan
The Village Hub	High street community hub, providing learning and signposting services, and cultural and environmental activities
Hamoaze House	Day support rehabilitation facilities for people and families in the community affected by a problematic use of drugs or alcohol – with gym, yoga and gardening activities
Pillars of Wellness	Provide accessible information on wellness and wellbeing, hosting talks, workshops and classes for the local community
An-Noor Arabic School	Saturday school teaching Arabic language primarily but not exclusively to children and young people
EZ Care	Community handyman and building service
Zebra Collective Co-operative (Welcome Hall)	Community organisers working in community development, reflective practice and training. Originally entered the programme as part of a collectives project to re-open the Welcome Hall in Devonport as a community run centre
Yoga Loft Plymouth	Yoga studio offering individual and community classes and workshops, from a building regenerated with community crowdfunded support
Keyham Shed (part of Keyham Neighbourhood Watch) Association	Local voluntary and Neighbourhood Watch groups, managing an asset transfer from the local authority to recover a disused former groundskeeper's hut for a multi-use community centre in Keyham
Devonport Property Management	Resident-owned housing management company
FabCity	Global network organisation with a core belief that sustainability and liveability depend on collective action and co-designed solutions, supporting the city to transition to producing everything it consumes by 2054, with a particular focus on social enterprise and community business

Impact of Empowering Places on individuals, community business and the wider community

Measuring the impact of the programme in Plymouth has been harder than in some of the other places simply because so many, diverse, community businesses have been supported.

At a community business level, it's clear that there are some instances where Empowering Places has been directly responsible for either initiating or accelerating the development of a community business. Some community businesses feel that they would not have existed had it not been for the Empowering Places programme because they would not have known where to start or who to speak to locally.

"
Really gave me an opportunity that's just unmissable ... I could never ever have funded this myself or indeed maybe would have thought about it, I would have thought it was well beyond my reach.
Delivery partner

Others credit the programme with expediating or facilitating their development, identifying that the programme came at a good time for Plymouth as it helped to add momentum to a set of existing initiatives.

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I honestly think if we didn't have that initial contact where we were asked to take part in what we're doing right now to develop the business, I think things would have stagnated with what we could have achieved. It's 100 per cent allowed us to push the business forward in what is and could have been a really difficult time.
Community business staff

While some community businesses may have developed anyway, there is a sense that the programme helped to move things along, by giving groups wanting to become community businesses the tools and framework to do it. And there is a recognition of the power that the wider programme holds and the fact that through Empowering Places, these community businesses tapped into an extended network that not only supported sustainability but also helped with the businesses' credibility.

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[Real Ideas has] been able to start some really, really good community businesses and secured quite a lot of resilient kind of ownership for the future as well around parks and buildings and stuff. It's kind of turbo-charged things quite a lot. I think having the Power to Change brand to that is really helpful to that as well, it brings a lot of legitimacy. And to say [it is] working with NEF and Co-ops UK and CLES.
Delivery partner

The role that Real Ideas has played in connecting individuals and community businesses with other local organisations is also really valued and seen to have opened up a world of new support, funding and training opportunities. There is a sense that the programme has helped to create a new peer support network of community businesses which, although still in its infancy, has the potential to provide valuable support and impact.

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I think it's really kind of joined up those different little pockets of people that interact with each other as community businesses better.
Delivery partner

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My network has absolutely exploded round about the people who I want to talk to.
Community business staff

The new partnerships that community businesses are creating are also credited with improving the businesses' profile within the city, and Real Ideas staff have also reflected on how the programme has allowed them to raise the profile of the community business sector generally both within Plymouth and beyond.

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I think we've been able to really use the programme well to really increase, you know, the profile of the sector, the conditions for growth of it and also that really individual and tailored support for the businesses we work with.
Delivery partner

However, it's worth noting that while the Empowering Places programme is seen as having a big impact in the development of local community businesses, there is a recognition that it is one of several factors in the Plymouth area that is encouraging a new focus on community and grassroots organisations, and some participants pointed out that it is hard to disentangle the influences and attribute impact to any one factor or programme.

At the wider community level Real Ideas estimates that, overall, the programme and the community businesses it has developed have helped to create 25 new jobs in Devonport and Stonehouse, engaged hundreds of volunteers, supported the training of 60 young people and supported the transfer of 15 land and building assets into community hands.

What these headline figures can't show, however, is the varied role that the community businesses have played in delivering this impact. Local stakeholders interviewed for the evaluation felt that there were some Plymouth community businesses that really stand out for the impact they have delivered for their local communities. This includes The Village Hub which is a community space that offers a range of support and activities for local people. It has delivered food boxes to the community and local stakeholders feel that it has done an excellent job of getting the community engaged in the future of the local park. It also engages residents in a range of activities from litter picking to health and debt advice, and community arts and crafts projects. Community theatre group Stiltskin has also been credited with having an impact on the local area. The group runs out of a section of a local park and local stakeholders reflected on how that has had an impact on both the quality of that area of the park and the number of people using it.

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People are travelling to the space ... I know lots of families who will travel to the park for the theatre and then will enjoy the rest of the park. It's that whole thing about breaking down barriers to what Devonport is all about. That whole space, that part of the park where they work now, is much more beautiful. And the fact that they have done festivals and activities there that have made it really beautiful has changed the whole atmosphere of the park.
Local stakeholder

Other examples of community businesses that have made a notable impact include Stonehouse Voice, the community newspaper which local stakeholders credit with shining a more positive light on the area as well as providing skills and confidence boosting development opportunities for local residents who get involved in writing content. Pollenize, the community rewilding project, has also been credited with getting the word out about the benefits of biodiversity in a way that the local council wouldn't be able to, as well as helping to make some local public spaces more attractive.

Other Plymouth community businesses are felt to have made less difference to their local area. Community business staff and local stakeholders we spoke to attributed this to the Real Ideas' approach to community business development, and the fact this largely focused on supporting individuals or smalls groups with business ideas rather than working with the community to identify a need or gap and then developing a community business that responded to that need.

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For me that's the difference between a community business that is created to meet a need and to sort of service the area versus a community business that kinda looks great but actually does it make any difference, really?
Community business staff

However, while there are mixed views about the impact that individual businesses have had on the community, there is a general sense among stakeholders, Real Ideas and community business staff that the Empowering Places programme has enabled Devonport and Stonehouse to build momentum for community led organisations, and has played a significant role in creating a strong platform for potential future change in the city.

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More people, in a better place, more joined up, which creates a set of unique opportunities which would never have existed before.
Delivery partner

3.4 The COVID-19 pandemic

Impact on the catalyst's delivery of Empowering Places

Catalyst staff we interviewed during the pandemic referred to its impact on Real Ideas itself as 'managed'. Staff reflected that a considerable refocussing of the business was required but also that as the organisation is comparatively large, agile and resilient it is not reliant on Empowering Places alone. Some of its buildings had to close and some staff had to be furloughed during the various lockdowns, but many of the organisation's staff were able to work from home relatively easily, and its cash position remained fairly strong. However, staff are certainly concerned about the future and expect that the current economic crisis will likely take a heavier toll on the organisation at some point.

To continue the momentum with Empowering Places, Real Ideas delivered more of its support virtually during the pandemic. It created Real Ideas Online, a programme of online content which was designed to support a range of businesses and organisations during and beyond the pandemic. This included a series of 12 webinars covering a range of topics on tackling challenges which reached a range of local organisations including some of the community businesses. Real Ideas staff feel that increasing the organisation's online offer has actually helped it to reach a wider section of the local community.

Real Ideas also worked with its community businesses to keep them as active as possible and allow staff to still receive an income while restrictions were in place. This included continuing to support them on developing their business structure, operating model and capital projects, help developing websites and training like community business leadership programmes.

Some community businesses had particular funding issues as a result of the pandemic, so Real Ideas needed to adapt its support to help them respond. Overall, however, catalyst staff have felt that their partnerships with the community businesses became stronger during this period and they looked for opportunities for the community businesses to come together and support each other in new ways whenever they could.
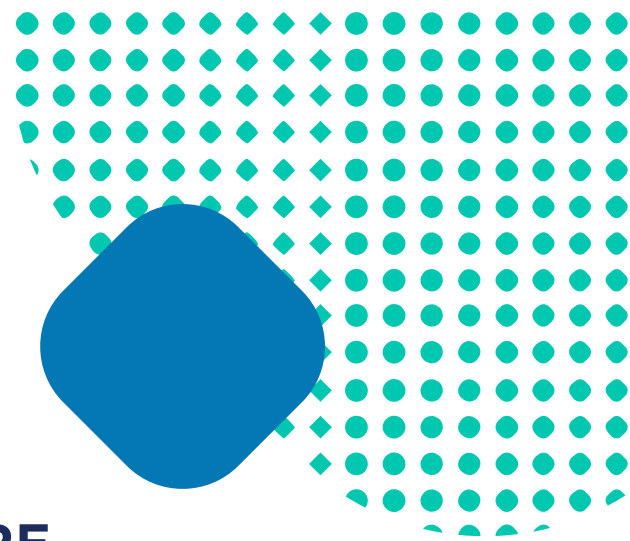
Impact on community businesses

The crisis affected each business differently, depending on their model and their stage of development. While some largely managed to ride it out, others had to implement major changes to support themselves and the communities they serve.

The staff at Pollenize, a conservation, pollination and rewilding project, felt they got off comparatively lightly during the first lockdown. The business has very low overheads and it was able to launch an online shop which generated a little income. A small support package from Empowering Places also helped to pay for their time and keep them afloat. Although community brewery Borrowed Parts had to stop a lot of activity at the advent of the pandemic, as they were not yet fully operational this more delayed than diminished their trading income.

Those on the cusp of receiving funding felt the sudden shutdown more keenly. Real Ideas was supporting several community businesses who were applying to Power to Change for grant funding when things closed down and planned activity was put on hold. Some, like Stiltskin Soapbox Children's Theatre received emergency funding from Power to Change which helped cushion the impact.

Organisations like Nudge Community Builders that rely more heavily on trading income lost more when restrictions were introduced, and found the period particularly challenging. While relatively financially stable it still made a lot of adjustments, and was very concerned about the impact on the community it served. The Nudge team worked hard to respond to some of the more urgent needs, by partnering with a local repair shop, for example, to provide access to technology for families who needed it most. Nudge also qualified for government grants and were able to distribute about 60 per cent of those funds to people and individuals and businesses who operated from their buildings, helping them sustain operations through the crisis.

The crisis prompted many community businesses to innovate, and some pivoted their business model so they operated in different ways. As well as inevitably transferring a lot of work online, some community businesses found other innovative ways to keep connected to the community. Village Hub staff who were keen to continue consultation work with local residents found a bench that was the right length for social distancing, and invited community members to sit and talk to them. Stiltskin delivered a programme of outdoor shows and began work on its community art garden.

4.
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

4.1 Ways of working

Real Ideas is hugely grateful for the opportunities and security the Empowering Places programme gave them and the community businesses they work with. While recognising the widespread benefits enjoyed by the catalyst and the wider Devonport and Stonehouse community through the programme, Real Ideas staff feel ready to move on to the next challenge. Alongside other projects and investments in the city, the network of established, trading and well-connected community business partners that Empowering Places helped create means Real Ideas now has a set of building blocks for a range of exciting projects that wouldn't be viable in cities without such a strong social economy.

Real Ideas has identified five key areas that it wants to focus on in the coming years: skills and employment training for young people; business support; community ownership; green investment; and a transition capacity fund to support faster growth and impact for community businesses. The organisation is hoping that these endeavours, along with what the Empowering Places programme has delivered, will help create wider system change in the local area.

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What is really key for me, is that there's been a set of new breakthrough projects and businesses that have created new anchors in new sort of hyperlocal communities, and we now have a network that's big and strong enough upon which you can do wider system change.
Delivery partner

4.2 Sustainability

While it is hard to predict with any confidence how sustainable such a diversity of community businesses can be, and some will inevitably fare better than others, Real Ideas and community business staff are optimistic that a good proportion will continue to trade successfully, and flourish. The local networks that have been created through Real Ideas' support provide a good foundation for the future development of the social economy in the area, and the longer-term outlook for community businesses in Plymouth looks promising.

This is most evident in the new programmes and investment that have emerged as a result of Empowering Places, particularly the Green Minds programme and the ongoing Future Parks Accelerator. Here a network of 10 community businesses supported through the programme enjoy continued support to lead on innovative approaches to restoring urban nature, though the green community hubs project. Working with Real Ideas and the local authority, Empowering Places community businesses are utilising their unique assets and community connections to unlock barriers to, and opportunities for, nature-based solutions in the urban environment.

ENDNOTES

1 Power to Change describes itself as: 'the independent trust that strengthens communities through community business. We use our experience to bring partners together to fund, grow and back community business to make places thrive. We are curious and rigorous; we do, test, and learn. And we are here to support community business, whatever the challenge.'

2 Informed by the 2015 English indices of deprivation (the most recent data available at the time). Available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015

3 Marsh Farm Futures in Luton was the seventh member of the Empowering Places cohort; its involvement with the programme ended in August 2019, shortly after Renaisi joined as evaluators.

4 Originally incubated by Action for Business Ltd in Carlisle Business Centre, Manningham.

5 An earlier version of this profile (2021) focused on qualitative and quantitative data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

6 English Indices of Deprivation: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/english-indices-of-deprivation

7 Local Insight: https://ocsi.uk/local-insight/

8 Thriving Places Index: https://www.thrivingplacesindex.org/

9 Place Analytics: https://gt-placeanalytics.co.uk/

10 UK Social Fabric Index: https://www.ukonward.com/data/social-fabric-index/

11 Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2019.

12 Local Insight (2019).

13 Thriving Places Index (2020).

14 Place Analytics, local authority-wide (2019).

15 UK Social Fabric Index (2020).

16 Hyperlocal booster version of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Community Life Survey (2021).

17 ibid.

18 MyCake analysis of Companies House and Charity Commission Data, Office for National Statistics (April 2022).

19 MyCake analysis of Companies House and Charity Commission Data, Office for National Statistics (April 2022).

20 ibid.

21 ibid.

22 ibid.

23 ibid.

24 July 2023 data from 360Giving, a charity that helps organisations to publish open, standardised grants data. For more information, see: GrantNav. This data excludes statutory funding from central government.

25 The data presented here is self-reported by the catalyst organisation in its annual monitoring reports to Power to Change, with missing data points indicating that no data was submitted.

26 Power to Change internal report (December 2022).

COMMUNITY FUND