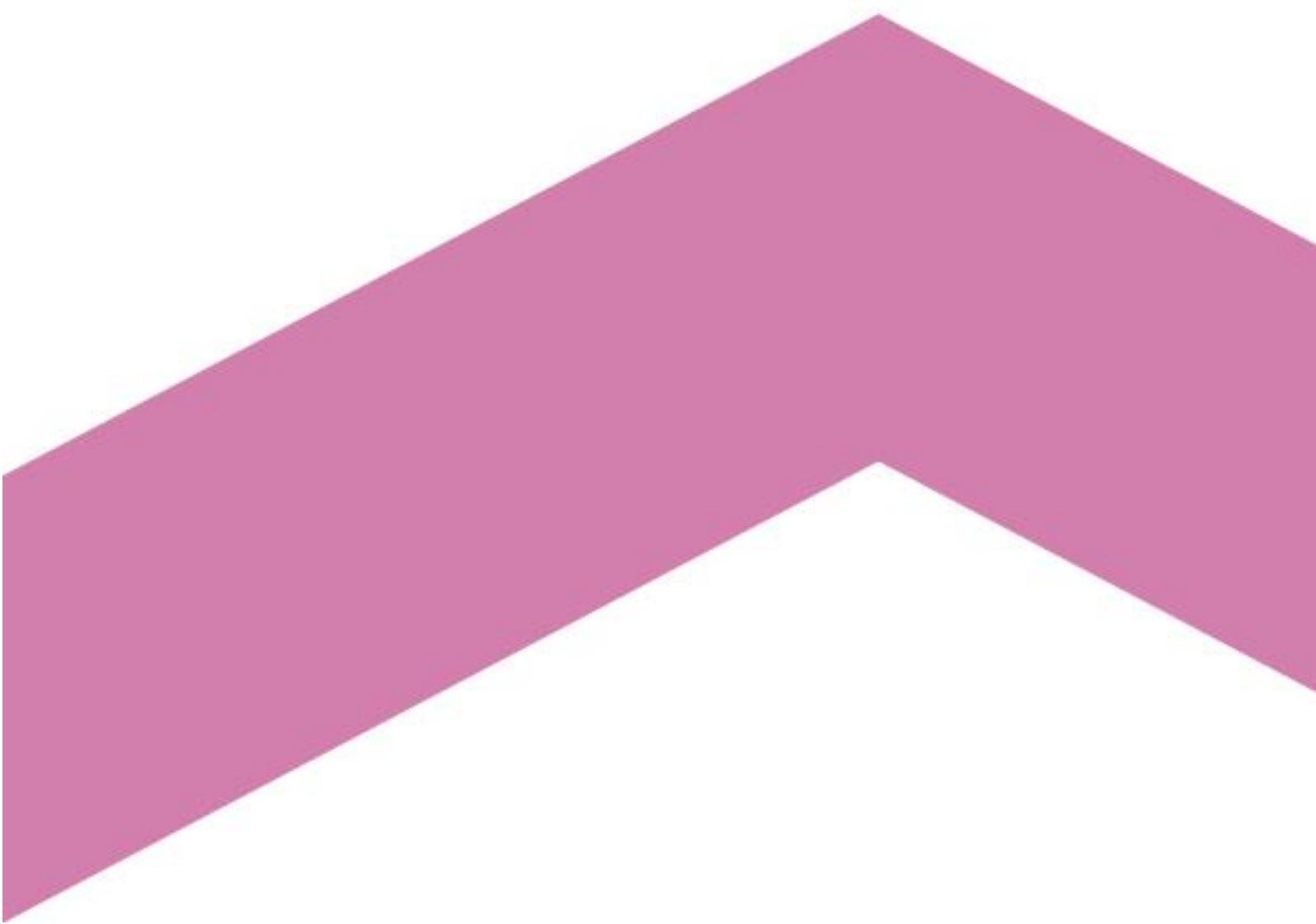


# 2021 Community Fund

2021/22 Report and Next Steps



## **Introduction – County Councillor Victoria Wilson, Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture**

Staffordshire county councillors have a key role in their divisions. We are here to listen to and support residents, to help local knowledge shape the county council's work, and to strengthen the communities in which we live.

One of the tools we have to help our communities is a small grant fund which we can use to invest in initiatives and projects for the benefit of local people across Staffordshire.

In 2020 we saw a huge challenge and a situation we had never experienced with the Covid-19 pandemic. Our county councillors' grant fund was quickly refocused so that it could support the wave of volunteering which sprang up, as Staffordshire people did everything they could to look after one another. I was, and remain, extremely proud of our communities for how they responded.

As we got used to the effects of Covid-19 on our lives, we looked at how the funding should be focused for the 2021/22 financial year. We saw that while we were definitely 'recovering' as a county, there was still a long way to go; many groups had still not been able to meet back up, and many projects which had been planned prior to the pandemic had still not been able to go ahead.

This fund was aimed at helping our voluntary and community sector think about 'where next'. While we adapted to a new normal, the 2021 Community Fund was about supporting groups to think about their future offer, how they will fundraise, and how they will return to ideas which they were going to pursue before the pandemic began.

We set broad criteria for funding applications, but the theme of all of them is around Covid-19 recovery, and getting our incredible voluntary, community and social enterprise sector back to being able to do all that it wants to.

This report gathers only some of the examples from the huge range of projects and organisations that the funding supported, but I hope that it gives you a sense of how our members continue to support communities in ways that make a real difference.

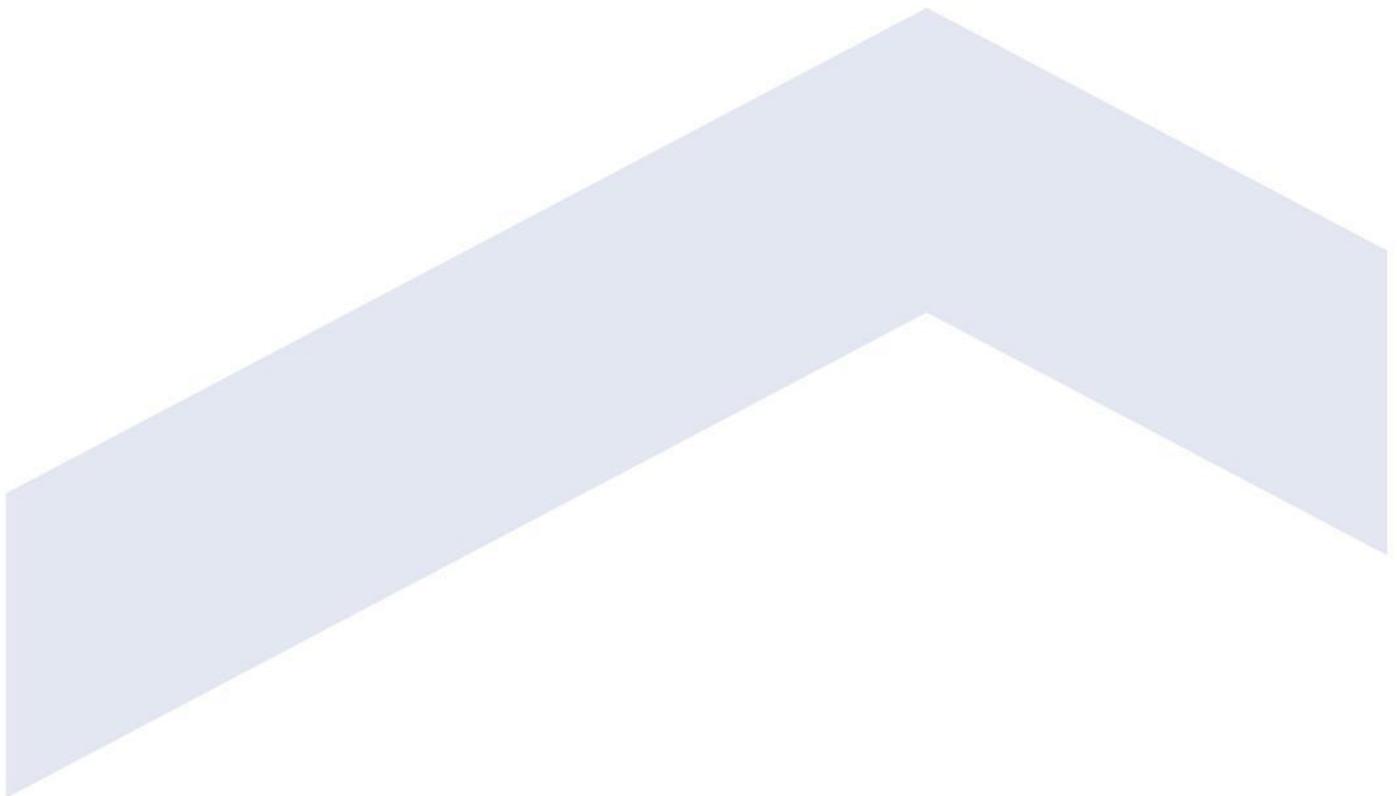
## **Background**

The 2021 Community Fund launched on 24 June 2021, once our new cohort of county councillors had time to settle into their roles after the May 2021 county council election.

It saw £2500 allocated to each County Councillor. Councillors were able to use as much or as little of this £2500 as they wanted to support projects which needed it, or to work together with other councillors and jointly support bigger projects.

Funding was available for the following three things, with a theme of Covid-19 recovery:

1. Projects to get Staffordshire's voluntary and community sector back to thriving, including initiatives that will help groups to develop or restart their own fundraising; or
2. Projects to help paused community activities get going again in a safe way; or
3. Projects looking to build on the community energy of the past year and keep it going, e.g. by transitioning new community networks into more formal community groups or Good Neighbour schemes



## **Success of the Fund**

This funding has been a direct part of supporting the communities of Staffordshire to get back up to full speed and recover from the pandemic.

We saw a huge range of projects being applied for and approved. It was clear that the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were still being felt, and some of the applications we saw were about continuing that great support which was felt during the early lockdowns. But we also saw projects which had been on hold, and groups who hadn't been able to achieve their core purpose for several years. We also saw many applications from groups looking to put themselves back on a stable footing after the devastating impacts that Covid-19 caused to their fundraising and planning.

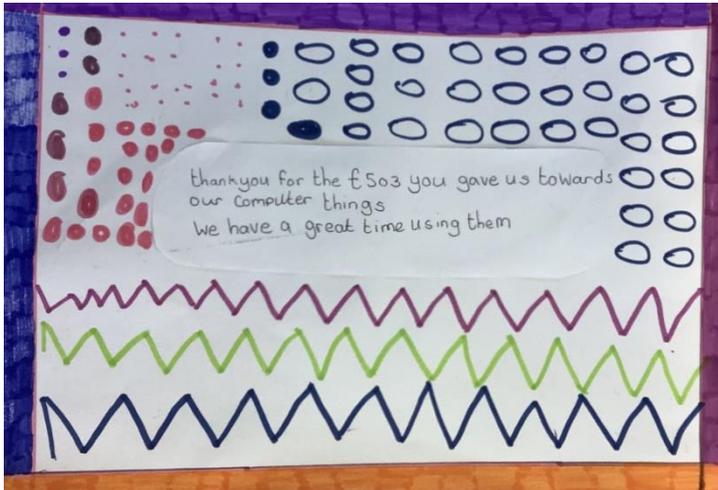
County Councillors played a huge role in promoting and encouraging applicants, and have made a huge difference with the funding, with a final total of £115,066 allocated for supporting 158 different groups and organisations.

There was no financial minimum match funding for applications to the 2021 Community Fund, other than in applications made from Parish Councils or businesses. Staffordshire's communities needed flexible support and had already been doing their bit, and the fund allowed county councillors to use their investment to help.

Below are some examples of the types of projects that have received funding through this year's fund.



**Projects to get Staffordshire's voluntary and community sector back to thriving, including initiatives that will help groups to develop or restart their own fundraising**



- **High Flyers South Staffordshire** used a £504 grant from the Fund to invest in new computers and printers, so that more of their 70 attendees able to benefit from the access.

- A £500 grant to Rising Brook Baptist Church for their **Welcome Space** project supported the costs of new furniture to help with Developing a welcoming, hospitable space for the local community. With hundreds of people visiting this space per week, this grant has helped the church to deliver its services to the community.
- **1st Fazeley Scout Group** were able to get back to what they love – enjoying a thrilling weekend of activities in the outdoors. A weekend residential experience at Kingswood helped the children to build independence and confidence, and was impossible during the Covid-19 pandemic.



- **Orchard Close Residents' Association** used a £300 grant to support a community visit to the Garrick Theatre, Lichfield, for their residents' association to get together and enjoy a trip to the pantomime, supporting their local theatre along the way. This was something that couldn't happen during Covid-19 and was sorely missed.



- The **Chase Grandparents and Grandchildren Group** received a small grant of £140, but that allowed them to invest in a better vacuum cleaner to ensure that after their intergenerational activity sessions, they can clean up in time to avoid incurring late rent charges. It's an example of a small grant that can help a vital community group to keep doing what they do.
- The **Putting You First** project by You 1st Emotional Support CIC received funding that allowed them to provide free activities, day trips and events, to any member of their community in need of mental health and wellbeing support, including vulnerable and lonely residents. They took members of the community to Trentham Gardens, including one client of their foodbank who had not left their house since the start of the pandemic, and for whom this was the first time they were comfortable leaving their home and socialising.
- The **Sewing for Everyone** project at West Chadsmoor Family Centre used member funding to deliver a face to face sewing course for participants, building on an online course already delivered, and with a plan to make the activity permanent so that it could be a continual learning journey with a social aspect to improve mental health and wellbeing.

- Several small grants helped the Katharine House Hospice to refurbish its **In-patient Family Room**, which has made a huge difference to the wellbeing and comfort of families visiting loved ones on the in-patient unit, who are coming to the end of their life. This could benefit up to 3000 people over the next 5 years. With Covid-19 still impacting on the Hospice's fundraising at the time, this small amount of funding helped the project to go ahead.
- Approach Dementia Support used free **Dementia Training Sessions** held in Burton, to increase awareness and change perceptions of dementia. They used £450 in funding to put on sessions which helped others to understand how the disease affects those who have been diagnosed, their carers and their families. Participants gained access to dementia awareness support and were able to draw on advice from Approach's staff.
- **Pickwood Forest Community Trust** combined member funding with a major crowdfunding effort in a project to undertake major land works and create a new wheelchair-friendly access track to the grounds and reinstate a former wetland pond, benefitting all the different groups who use the facilities and wildlife free of charge.
- Dizzy Heights Staffs CIC used member funding to invest in new equipment for their kitchen, allowing them to provide hot food to the young people attending **Stapenhill Short Street Cafe Youth Club**. Because their existing funding could not cover this, the Community Fund was able to support the further growth of their offer.



- **The Community Café** at the Edward Marsh Centre is a new facility set up within a self-funding community centre for the Village of Kinver and the local area. Member funding supported the final piece of refurbishment required for getting the café off the ground. The café has proved extremely successful and its popularity has increased tremendously. The café are now able to offer placements for several young people with special needs, which has been a real source of inspiration for them in driving the centre forward.



### Projects to help paused community activities get going again in a safe way



- The Brewwood Singers' **Come and Sing!** project helped to kickstart their activities post-Covid by supporting the additional costs of things like moving to a larger hall. It encouraged participation and discovery of singing as a community activity which improves wellbeing and confidence, and member funding also helped to put on the successful Come and Sing event in March.
- £500 helped **St Mary's Friendship Club** to continue meeting, carry on with its work helping overcome loneliness and isolation in the Cannock Chase area. Member funding helped sessions to go ahead while fundraising efforts were still impacted, meaning that provision of hot meals, and trips out to theatre events, could take place again once it was safe to do so.

- **Cannock Chase Shed** are a local branch of the national 'Shed' movement of self-help community groups who bring people together to connect by making and repairing things together. £140 from county councillors allowed for purchase of new tools to deliver a special project.



- The **Friends of Hednesford Park / Cannock Chase Mental Health Hub / Time to Change Cannock** made a joint application for £500 funding for a project on reducing isolation after the Covid-19 pandemic, using a project in Hednesford Park to achieve this, and bringing in the expertise of Forest of Mercia CIC too. Young volunteers from Futures at SSC and others worked together in the park, and vulnerable volunteers were recognised and rewarded with certificates and medals for the important work they contributed to the parks and open spaces.

- MHA Communities South Staffordshire received £500 for their project around **supported re-engagement to community based activities**.



They had provided remote services such as telephone befriending, shopping support etc but found that confidence in participation in community activities was low after Covid-19, so ran a project about promoting independence through befriending, supporting people on a short-term basis to feel more confident in getting themselves back to face-to-face activity. With the organisation already facing increased costs of restarting activity safely, this funding supported people in getting back out by helping the

organisation to offset some of their costs while this short-term intervention took off.

- **Lunch Bunch** at the Cherished Coffee Shop used £500 to set up a community lunch (named 'The Lunch Bunch') catering for up to thirty-six people, to be held every Tuesday at the Cherished Community Café. This is a weekly event providing a healthy hot meal, pudding, drink and an activity, for people in the community to come. The community lunch event has become very popular with between 25 to 30 people regularly attending each week, and is receiving positive feedback especially from those people who are on their own and those who find it challenging to integrate back into the community after the lifting of the Covid pandemic restrictions.



- £250 helped **History Live** to go ahead with two coach trips in a Covid-safe way, bringing their activities back to in-person visits. The funding also helped with Covid adaptations such as increased sanitiser, and helped the group to go ahead with this kind of project when they had already had to spend more on other adaptations such as a bigger venue for safety.

- **Abbots Bromley Sports Association (ABSA)** used funding to support the continued development of their sports ground, which has seen the charity raise and make a huge investment totalling more than £760,000 to this point. Member funding of £500 allowed for support around preparing a junior football pitch, purchasing new essential machinery and providing temporary facilities and secure storage, with the long term aim of making the site a safe environment for all to have recreation, activity and reflection.



**Projects looking to build on the community energy of the past year and keep it going, e.g. by transitioning new community networks into more formal community groups or Good Neighbour schemes**

- **Sustainability in Colwich & The Haywoods** and **Aston and Weymouth Village Hall** both received funding towards the costs of setting up a new online presence, building on the social connections that have been made over the past few years and the Covid-19 pandemic in particular. These are about formalising approaches that have developed (for example allowing Aston and Weymouth Village Hall to take cashless payments) but are also about communicating and sharing information to help the community activity of recent times to continue.

- Cherry Orchard Garden Services CIC's **IT for the Future** project allowed them to invest in ICT equipment which enables them to deliver projects over the coming years. The first is around helping beneficiaries of the organisation with learning disabilities around how to use IT equipment such as laptops and tablets and learning the importance of internet safety when communicating online, avoiding scams, and how to use online banking.



- **Rugeley Youth Council** used £163 member funding to maintain their website and take forward plans with expansion. This has seen a 44% increase in the number of visits to the website and as a result the membership of the group has almost doubled. This website and the group's social media platforms are their biggest and most important form of communication, and are vital in helping them complete the mission of empowering the young people of Rugeley, and giving them a say in the future of their town.

- **Hidden Warriors CIC**, who were active in providing community support and packs to keep people active during the Covid-19 pandemic, used member funding for a project in an assisted living complex, to ensure that those left feeling more isolated after Covid were still supported, through activities to celebrate the birthdays of those people with limited family connections, and provide activities to tackle anxiety.



These are just some of the examples, and the rest can be viewed on the Staffordshire County Council website at

<https://apps2.staffordshire.gov.uk/WEB/PHPFund/details.aspx?PageIndex=1&Councillor=0&FundPeriod=4>

### **Next steps**

While the impacts of Covid-19 have not yet gone away, we continue to adapt and Staffordshire continues to recover. There remains a need for county councillors to be able to support communities around dealing with these impacts, but with a broad remit so that the funding can be used as it is needed locally. What we are seeing now is a huge variety of projects coming forward across the breadth of our whole community sector and our whole county. Many no longer relate to direct Covid-19 support, but instead are about getting back to the things we want to do, within our new context.

This is why the member fund for 2022/23 financial year, called the 2022 Community Fund, is targeted at an even broader range of criteria. In particular, we saw applications starting to appear through the 2021 Community Fund which related to taking care of the community environment and improving local assets. This has been specifically added as a fund criterion for the 2022 Community Fund, which covers:

## **1. Community projects about looking after ourselves**

For example:

- Projects which will support and enhance personal physical health
- Projects which will support the improvement of wellbeing, resilience and independence

## **2. Community projects about looking after those around us**

For example:

- Projects to connect people in communities to support, or to each other
- Projects to give children and young people the best start in life, and the chance to achieve their potential
- Projects which will support those who need additional help

## **3. Community projects about looking after your place**

For example:

- Projects which will enhance the places where we live
- Projects which will further develop our community spaces
- Projects that will bring people together to increase community spirit including celebrating the Queen's Platinum Jubilee

In future when the timing is right, we will consider the benefits of moving back to a more targeted focus for the funding, but for now it is recognised that there is value in keeping the use of the fund broad for communities to draw on as they need.

## **Conclusion**

The 2021 Community Fund has been a successful part of Staffordshire's communities moving beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, helping them to restart activity and get back to planning for the future. In 2022/23 we are building on that success with a focus on community activity flourishing, with councillors using their fund to help groups and activity across Staffordshire thrive.

