

Link Up & COVID - Response, Recovery & Renewal: Host Testimonies

Our [Transforming Relationships Annual Report](#) details how, as an essential part of the local infrastructure, our workers swiftly moved to co-ordinate/support responses to the crisis. In June alone, this included weekly support for 1,700 vulnerable people. In total that month, our workers made 4297 deliveries, 2624 support & wellbeing calls and 651 outreach connections.

Beyond these statistics, the testimonies from our local host organisations below, illuminate why Link Up was so effective in its response. They also spell-out why Link Up's continued presence will be fundamental to the recovery and renewal of these communities.

I. Link Up Gallatown - Liz Easton, General Secretary, Kirkcaldy YMCA

Supporting Inspiring Scotland to secure future funding for our Link Up Programme is crucial for Kirkcaldy YMCA.

Our Link Up The Gallatown project supports to high levels, at grass roots, the most vulnerable, disadvantaged and hard to reach people of all ages, living in the Gallatown community which is one of the most deprived in Fife. Without Link Up the Gallatown, there would be a serious reduction in support and learning activities in this, lower levels of community involvement in decision making/community engagement and participation and an increase in issues (mental health, food poverty) and a real lack of opportunity built around positive relationships and acceptance of all that Link Up does/offers.

As Kirkcaldy YMCA is embedded in the Kirkcaldy area (offering support and services for over 134 years) people know and trust us, our Link Up work very much follows this ethos, reflecting our community needs led approach. Through Link Up, we have been afforded the opportunity to focus upon the Gallatown – ever prevailing issues with long term unemployment, poverty, child poverty – all issues associated with this. This has enabled us to work closely with local people, building skills, confidence, a security/value of their place in their local community, to identify issues and gaps and look to address these.

One clear success for us through Link Up, was identifying the need for a fit for purpose community facility in this area – accessible and local – this has led to the asset transfer of a property/grounds from Fife Council and the securing of £638,000 to create a new build to support community activity. This sits alongside the development of Kirkcaldy's first Bike Skills course and the Gallatown Bike HUB – social enterprise and the development of a much needed, safe outdoor nature play space for children and families. These facilities will go on to provide many opportunities for the Gallatown community, helping tackle the persisting myriad of issues that affect the area and it's people.

From the outset of the Corona virus pandemic, the support given to us very quickly via Inspiring Scotland was invaluable – the speed of response being of utmost importance and allowing us to very quickly begin responding to community need. Both the financial support and the advice in managing during this period was invaluable, ensuring we could deliver services and support safely and within the guidance, that we could support staff – across all programmes appropriately and that it enabled us to reach further and provide more than we first thought. This partly as the first tranche of financial support made available made us realise the extent of need and the desperation (financial and wellbeing) of the people being supported, this then enabling us to seek further funds to extend the support services to meet identified needs we could offer during this period. The impact of covid on already vulnerable and fragmented communities has not yet began to show in full and will, I fear, take many years to tackle.

We are convinced that we will need at least 2 years to return to the 'place' people were at in March 2020, with a further 5 years to tackle the long lasting impact of covid on people and communities – Kirkcaldy YMCA will strive to do as much as possible, but require support to do so. There is a long

and difficult journey ahead of us, with a range of complicated and complex issues that will require support, if we are to have any hope of supporting people to maximise their potential and inclusion in a positive and health community. It would be massively detrimental to our work and abilities to lose Link Up – a programme specifically designed to focus upon the people (as the assets) within a very much marginalised and at risk community.

Given the financial demands locally, we would struggle, find it practically impossible to have the level of investment afforded to Inspiring Scotland for Link Up available locally. It is critical and crucial that the Link Up programme be retained, needed now more than ever to support long-term recovery in these unprecedented times.

2. Link Up Saltcoats – Barbara Hastings, CEO, The Ayrshire Community Trust

Link Up is a key driver in North Ayrshire for achieving the aspirations of local communities, staff make it look very easy but the specific skills they have enable people to believe in themselves, this initial confidence then grows into people being able to do things for themselves, a true asset based approach.

Link Up needs to be a long term approach, staff are based in communities where deprivation has been the focus for decades rather than focussing on the resilience and capability people really have. Relationships are key so staff have time to create strong meaningful relationships where people feel safe to express their fears but also take the first step to local democracy.

Throughout Lock Down staff continued to engage with the community by using innovative approaches. During this time, it became evident how important the connection and communication was for people not only to staff but with each other and Link UP staff enabled that to continue. In addition, local people reacted to their local needs as they had the confidence to do so.

TACT was approached to act as host, possibly because we believe if people are given the right support they have the capability to improve their lives and that of their local community but we recognise this takes time. Taking an enabling approach rather than creating dependency takes time, takes resources, and need patience but the end result is priceless.

If national decision makers really want community wealth to flourish the continuation of funding for Link UP projects is vital. As a host we will work with Link UP to secure its future in order for the most vulnerable communities to experience positive interventions based on their needs and desires.

3. Link Up Gorbals – Joe McConnell, Charity Manager, Crossroads Youth & Community Association

Crossroads has been working collaboratively with Inspiring Scotland for nine years delivering the Link Up programme in Gorbals. It is a working relationship unlike any other we have and is a model for grant provision we regard highly and have benefitted much from. The relationship between our organisations prefigures that which we seek with our communities, one based on shared respect, affiliation, and sense of control and influence. The model ensures Inspiring Scotland is present and alongside us in the delivery of Link Up. This means they understand the landscape and challenges of the work in practice and those faced by communities at grassroots level; more than any other funder, they are agile in response and relevant in their support when called for.

The true worth of Inspiring Scotland's sensitive approach was demonstrated during the coronavirus crisis. They were the first amongst our broad network to react and provide clear and appropriate strategy and leadership, presenting a value-based community action response guidance paper as early as March 16th. They also enabled access to crucial crisis funding quickly and efficiently and was our main source for accurate and accessible guidance and information; filtering concisely the mass of covid-19 information coming out across spring and summer.

Swift strategic leadership at local level, certainly in our areas of operation in Gorbals and Govanhill, did not happen at all well in the crucial early phase of the crisis. By their own initiative local operatives

of statutory services joined forces with the voluntary sector organisations to quickly form planned responses. In both Gorbals and Govanhill we adopted, and adapted to the local context, Inspiring Scotland's strategy paper and shared with partners. It provided order and structure in what could have been a chaotic situation. As a manager and active local partnership collaborator I relied heavily on this strategic response plan and subsequent support supplied by Inspiring Scotland; combined it formed the basis for Crossroads' own and our input to the area wide crisis work over the following months.

At crisis point Inspiring Scotland's leadership and support was invaluable. Successively, as the months of crisis and lockdown continued to evolve the Link Up worker's uniquely human approach (operating without 'agenda', taking time to understand the lives of people, their strengths, motivations and aspirations) proved equally vital when addressing the crisis of confidence, anxieties, isolation which developed as time went on. The efficacy of pre-crisis Link Up work was also underscored in the agency displayed by group members in their own response to the crisis. They responded to many of the emerging needs themselves or, if required, were clear about how we could best support them. Group members called each other regularly, delivered essential items to each other, connected with neighbours who were needing support, and when they were able to, met up, enjoyed a laugh and had picnics together. The strong bonds that were already formed by participating in Link Up meant that during the crisis many folks have had a social, emotional, and practical life-line.

Moving forward into recovery and renewal we must acknowledge the unequal affects the crisis has had on our communities and focus on work that seeks to redress this. The poor, the excluded, the disenfranchised and those with the poorest of health have been disproportionately affected during the pandemic. Where a community is marginalised and dispirited a wellbeing approach, such as Link Up's, to community building is a key response, and in time participants will gain the confidence to address obstacles to their growth.

Link Up seeks through its approach to develop three vital determinates for living well and flourishing: - status (the respect we receive from others), control (influence over the things that affect our lives) and affiliation (sense of belonging) – these are also core determinates of better mental health & wellbeing and for establishing community building from inside communities themselves; key to Scotland renewal and recovery from this crisis. Bringing people together in a community-led project, who have all experienced similar issues, can act as a catalyst for change and can in itself be a pathway to recovery; knowing you are not alone, developing an understanding that there are often structural causes to private issues; and determining with others solutions to shared issues are powerful motivators for action and key steps in individual recovery as well as community development.

Link Up has been closely monitored for the duration of the programme and proven time and again its effectiveness. The long term investment in Link Up, I believe, will now pay dividends in the recovery and renewal of communities, bringing to bear its focus on individual and collective wellbeing which is going to provide the bedrock for recovery and community development work in the coming months.

4. Link Up Leith ('Inspiring Leith') – Alasdair Bennett, CEO, Bethany Christian Trust

In September 2011 Bethany were appointed host organisation for Inspiring Scotland's "Link Up". Inspiring Leith started in January 2012 with many 'link' activities having come to fruition since then with a significant number of people taking part in activities throughout the course of a week every month. Since February 2015 the project has employed a second worker to cope with the increased number of people being worked with and the scale of the activities taking place. In recent years, two of the activity groups, Leith Community Archers and Leith Community cinema have become self-constituted and independent of Link Up, continuing to be run by local people for local people. This attests to the sustainable way Inspiring Leith sparks community change, builds the capacity of local people and empowers groups to grow independently when appropriate.

Link Up has had an enormous impact on how Bethany prevent homelessness across Scotland. The Asset based approach helps to connect local people and strengthen community ties. This is at the heart of strengthening safety nets for people in communities known for deprivation where

homelessness is more likely to occur. By being asset based and rooted in people's strengths, people's confidence, self-esteem and skills are brought to the forefront and given the opportunity to flourish. Since 2012 Bethany have seen how effective the benefits of such an asset based approach is. The model of Link Up has influenced Bethany's existing approach in new locations across Scotland in Torry, Menzieshill, Gorebridge, Moredun, Leith and the Calders as well as Glasgow's Tollcross, Possilpark and St George's Cross.

When Covid restrictions were implemented in March 2020 Bethany's Link Up workers were already in community with links to 100 households both within Leith and neighbouring areas. By already being immersed within the local community, the workers were visible and able to hear very clearly, what the needs were of the people living in the area. They were privileged to be able to both observe and respond week on week to how the pandemic and restrictions were affecting the lives of not just the people they already worked with but their neighbours and extended family too. As Inspiring Leith had been part of community efforts for over 8 years, they had ties and partnerships with organisations in the vicinity including foodbanks and local support groups and associations. By being in the heart of community where it mattered most from one day to the next the Link Up workers were on hand to give advice where needed and logistically meet the needs presented to them. Due to their local knowledge, in March 2020, the workers already had a strong understanding of where those most likely to be impacted lived and they knew them by name, making the response both fast and effective.

When restrictions eased and in line with government guidance, Inspiring Leith were able to bring people together once again. The flexibility of the project led to a blended approach using both face to face, digital and phone contact. This enabling the project to support individual community members and groups in a way that reflected community members comfort levels and needs. This involved using ZOOM to host the craft group and trialling an online discussion group with some participants. The weekly stall at Cables Wynd was busy with families taking part in gardening and children painting stones to decorate the community space. Through Link Up's contact to pro bono supporters a psychotherapist was able to be on hand to both support staff and Leith residents directly.

Since the easing of restrictions, Inspiring Leith's focus has been on adapting to the changing context in the community. This has involved reorienting their work, from meeting the immediate emotional and physical needs of the people they work with back towards the asset-based way of working. This has involved bringing people together face to face in line with government guidance. Gardening, upcycling, craft and walking groups have begun to meet in cafés and outside spaces. These meetings have provided the opportunity for people to meet together and see each other for the first time in months and have been a great source of hope for those who have attended and acted as a sign that community is still possible in these difficult times. Our commitment to that community has led to new relationships and because of these; the team are looking forward to some new initiatives in 2021.

Inspiring Leith are on the ground and ingrained within local community. They are known for coming alongside people, meeting them where they are at and moving with people at their pace. This achieves lasting impact and meaningful change for the good of community. It also leads to personal transformation for those who participate in existing Link Up activities as well as those working to develop new ones. Everyone is welcomed from every walk of life. Renewed funding for Link Up is an investment for today, tomorrow and generations to come. To truly see lives transformed, homelessness ended, recovery from addiction and people's wellbeing and health enhanced the focus needs to be on our local communities and by working with people to see their desires and vision for their communities supported with the initiatives they desire. The answers to transforming our communities lay with the people in those communities who work with Link Up who remain visible at the grassroots on the doorsteps of local people working with them to innovate and initiate meaningful activities that will pay dividends for generations to come.

5. Link Up Muirhouse – Kate Wimpers, Director, North Edinburgh Arts

I am writing in support of the Link Up programme, the hosting of which has had a marked and positive effect on the work of North Edinburgh Arts, and for the communities we serve. The impact of the programme, and the centrality of it to NEA, has been amplified greatly by our Covid-19 response.

As you are aware North Edinburgh Arts offers local residents a place to relax, explore, learn, meet, share, volunteer and have fun in. In the year running to the start of the pandemic 40,000 visits were made to the venue that ‘floats like a bright bubble behind the Muirhouse shopping centre’ (STV Local). NEA sits in the heart of the Muirhouse community, which ranks in the bottom 5% of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, and is ranked as one of the most deprived wards in the city (www.simd.org.2020).

In early April 2020 NEA was able to repurpose and maximise the resources to hand, i.e. staff and building, to address the immediate needs of vulnerable and isolating community members. Funds were raised to deliver our own programme of work and assist the Covid-19 emergency work across North Edinburgh. The Link Up team were instrumental in a) maintaining connections with those community members most in need, approx. 150 individuals, and b) using local intelligence to ensure resources flowed when and where they would be most effective.

NEA was part of a network of local charities and organisations that coordinated food provision and support to local individuals and families; redirecting our resources to supply thousands of free meals to people in the area. Again the Link Up team led on this for NEA, and in response to the clear need for affordable and nutritious food by the community, NEA became the second organisation in Scotland to join the Your Local Pantry network (<https://www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk/>) run by the Link Up team and local volunteers.

The Link Up team have been able to maximize the resources and assets NEA has for our community, with this ‘joining of the dots’ having been fundamental to the success and robustness of our community response during and beyond the lockdown. It is essential to maintain community confidence that the Link Up programme is sustained within our organisation, and others across the country. The underpinning and stabilising of this programme, and the work it carries out, is vitally important to our residents and the recovery and renewal of this community in the post-COVID period.

6. Link Up Craigmillar – Mark Hoolahan, CEO, Thistle Foundation

Thistle Foundation has partnered with the Link Up Programme and hosted a Link Up Worker since 2016. This partnership followed the opening of Thistle’s new Centre of Wellbeing in Craigmillar Edinburgh: an accessible, welcoming and friendly community space for people that are supported by Thistle, local residents and the wider community. The Centre is a fundamental foundation for Thistle to sustain its support to the local community as it has done since the early 1940s. The building hosts a range of health and wellbeing activities including: 1:1 support; group-based Lifestyle management courses, a small inclusive community gym on site; and we hold classes and a range of social and activity-based groups.

Through our partnership with Link Up, Thistle has been able to reach out from beyond our building right into the heart of the Craigmillar community to connect people and facilitate group based supports across the community. While the initial phase of the project provided an opportunity to use the centre as a convenient accessible space, the focus has now firmly shifted emphasis toward identifying other gathering spaces and places within the local community.

The Link Up Programme has proven invaluable to Thistle during the coronavirus pandemic. As we at Thistle have navigated the complexities associated with continuing to provide support for people who have been most negatively impacted by coronavirus and other long term health conditions, Link Up staff, as our strategic partners, have shared their experience of working with others across the country to help us ensure that access to support including face to face support is being remobilised as far as possible. This has and is helping us to be confident that our decision making is safe and in line with

government guidance whilst at the same enabling us to continue reaching out to support people who may be a risk of further social isolation and deteriorating circumstances.

Operationally, our local Link Up worker paved the way, modelling good risk enabling decision making, for our wellbeing practitioners to apply when meeting people who could not access support using remote technology. The nature of Thistle's wellbeing support is now changing due to the influence our local worker has had on the team. Link Up has reinforced the value of simple minimalist measures to ameliorate the impacts of loneliness and isolation as even having one thing to look forward to in the week for some people can make the difference between hopefulness and hopelessness.

As a result of the Link Up contribution to our work Post COVID, we will likely feature less in people's lives in order for people to more fully hold resilience and hope within themselves and their communities. Sustaining the Link Up programme will undoubtedly be an important element to our recovery and renewal.