

# Reflecting on a year like no other

2020/21 Impact Report



# A year like no other...

The effect of Covid-19 on people and communities across Somerset has clearly illustrated how in touch local groups and charities are with the needs of their communities.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of local knowledge, adaptability and responsiveness – all the things that the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector is known for.

Somerset is so lucky to have such a strong, diverse and vibrant VCSE sector. Embedded within their communities, the majority of VCSE organisations in Somerset work at a very local level, supporting people on the doorstep. They are adept at accessing under-represented and vulnerable groups; able to advocate on their behalf and provide practical and emotional support.

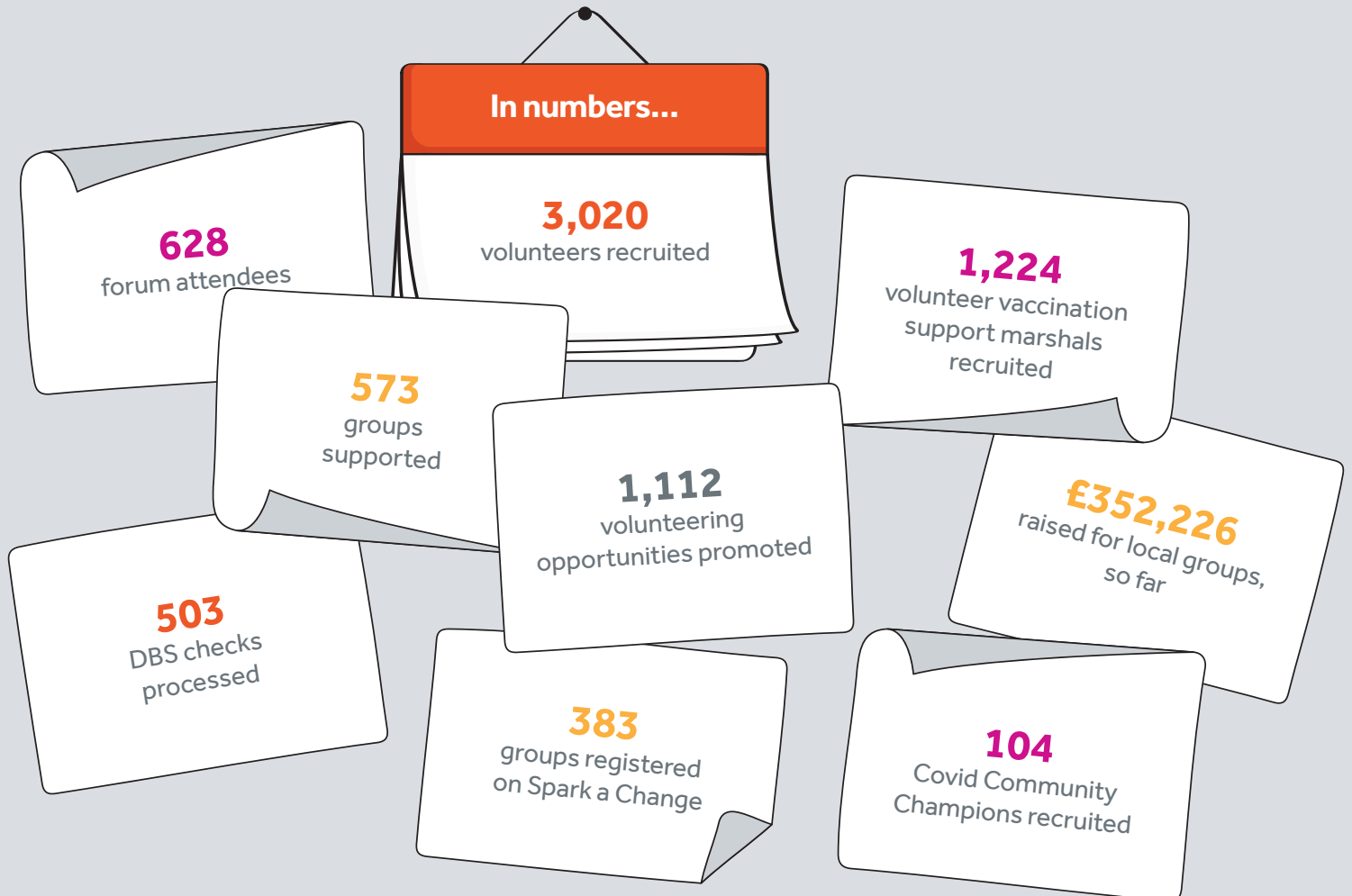
Since the pandemic hit in March 2020, people have faced some of the most difficult times of their lives. From the initial lockdown to the 'learning to live with it', from the social isolation to the challenges of home schooling, from the fear of losing loved ones to the reality of losing jobs.

Within days, community groups across the county – formal and informal – networks, neighbours and social enterprises, rallied round to help people in need. At a time of crisis, the VCSE and 'community action' really came into its own.

In a year like no other, we have been overwhelmed by the response of voluntary groups and communities. It has been a real privilege to work with such amazing organisations and fantastic volunteers, especially during such challenging times.

Never has our VCSE sector been more needed. A huge thank you to you all.

**#NeverMoreNeeded**

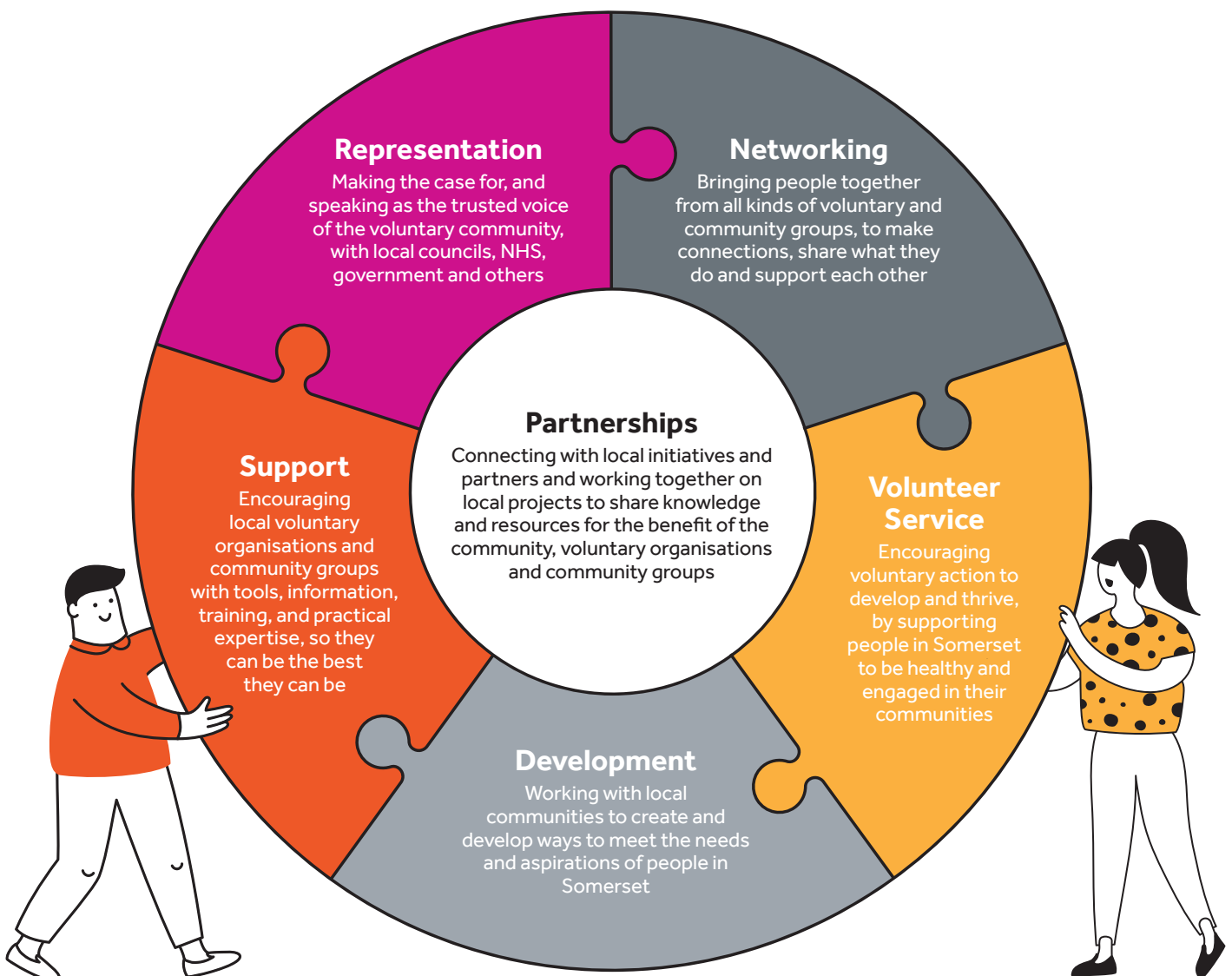


# Inspiring communities

Here at Spark Somerset, we support and champion the local VCSE sector. We do this by providing a range of services, training and advice to inspire, change lives, and help build resilient communities.

We also believe that everyone should have the opportunity to thrive. So, we work with local partners to provide volunteering opportunities for all. We are passionate about the value of social action – to tackle loneliness, to overcome adversity, to improve health and wellbeing, to develop skills and confidence, and to build stronger communities.

As a countywide charity, we can work at scale, sharing our expertise, making connections, advocating on behalf of the sector and building partnerships to make an even bigger impact.





# Navigating a year like no other...

Our team, along with the rest of the sector, stepped up to provide a range of extra support in response to the pandemic.



- Recruitment of Vaccination Volunteers commences
- Funding secured for Covid Confident Communities booklet

MARCH 2020

**March 20**  
Coronahelpers online volunteer platform launched



● **March 23**  
PM announces the first lockdown in the UK, ordering people to "stay at home"

● **Late March**  
Support developed for Covid groups (including online resources, 121 support, Facebook group, webinars, chat facility and coaching)

APRIL

- Spark go countywide
- Small essential items fund administered (for unconstituted groups offering Covid-19 support)
- Spark Training goes online



**August 14**  
Lockdown restrictions eased further

- New Funding Team established advising and supporting on funding and sustainability

AUGUST



- Free Emergency First Aid at Work training delivered to enable socially distanced Men's Shed meetings



**September 14**  
'Rule of six' introduced banning indoor and outdoor social gatherings above six in England

SEPTEMBER

DECEMBER

● **December 2**  
Second lockdown ends after four weeks

- Launch of Open Mental Health Community Grants (on behalf of the Somerset Mental Health Alliance)

**Open**  
Mental Health

NOVEMBER

**October 31**  
Second lockdown in England announced (to prevent a "medical and moral disaster" for the NHS)

JANUARY 2021

**January 6**  
England enters third national lockdown

- First Open Mental Health volunteers begin registering



- First Food Forum takes place to support local groups addressing food poverty

- Lottery funding awarded to recruit three place-based Community Development Workers (in Bridgwater, Taunton and Chard)



- Countywide, fortnightly online Carers Forum commences (for Somerset Carers Service and supported by Alzheimer's Society)



**April 16**  
Lockdown extended for 'at least' three weeks

**April 30**  
PM says "we are past the peak" of the pandemic

● Spark employees contribute to Health & Care workforce wellbeing projects (led by the CCG, to address the high levels of anxiety and exhaustion experienced by some staff & volunteers during Covid)

● Volunteer Pack launched



**June 1**  
Phased re-opening of schools in England commences



**June 1-7**  
Volunteers Week

**MAY**

**JUNE**

● Launch of 'Celebrating Somerset's Vital Volunteers' video  
● GP Helper Scheme launched to match socially isolated patients with volunteers

**June 23**  
PM announces relaxing of restrictions and 2m social distancing rule

**June 15**  
Non-essential shops reopen



● Somerset VCSE State of the Sector Report 2020 published  
● Somerset Community Foundation funding awarded to offer targeted training to meet emerging needs

● Cuppa Campaign supported by Miles Tea & Coffee, Design Hive and Somerset Cricket Club

**JULY**

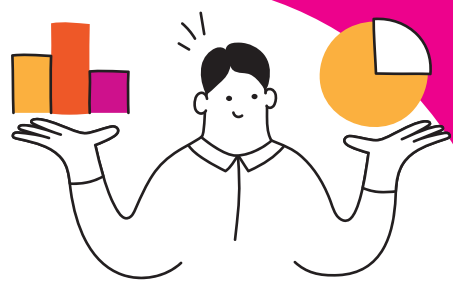


**September 15**  
Inaugural 'Integrated Volunteering Steering Group' meeting held

● Spark a Change volunteering website launched



● Spark appointed Local Liaison Lead for national VCS Emergencies Partnership



● 'Money into Somerset' report provides analysis of where further support is needed  
● Dedicated funding social media channels launched (to share news, updates and enable more user participation)  
● Somerset NHS Foundation Trust agree funding for new Digital Inclusion project

● Covid Community Champions network launched



**OCTOBER**

● Bank of skilled fundraising consultants recruited (to provide hands-on support for grant applications)

● Community Cookbook commissioned (Take Part Project)



**FEBRUARY 2021**

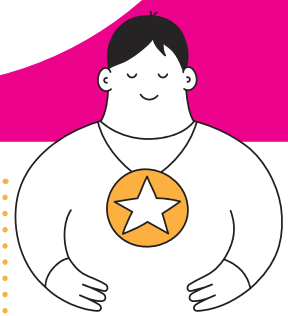
● Digital Inclusion Project Manager joins Spark Somerset

**MARCH 2021**

● £50k secured for the Thriving Communities project



● 1,300+ Vaccination Volunteers recruited



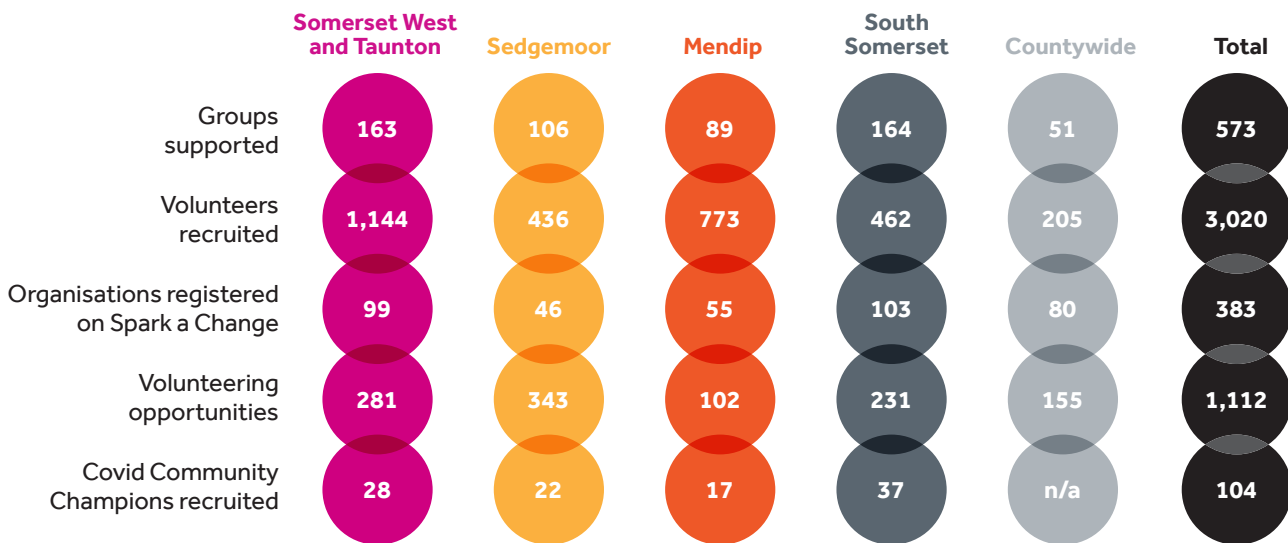
● 104 Covid Community Champions recruited

# Countywide support and expertise

On 1 April 2020, we became a countywide charity and now provide services across Somerset. Throughout the region we provided advice and support to over 1,000 groups. This included help with governance, funding, volunteering, forming collaborations, and community events.

Our countywide reach brings enormous benefits to our charity and the groups that we support, as it allows us to widen the scope of our work. It also means that the VCSE sector has a stronger voice, with a clear route via Spark Somerset as an 'honest broker' to key stakeholders and decision makers.

That said, our team are embedded in our local communities, working everyday with groups, staff and volunteers at a grass roots level. We turn this local knowledge and passion into action, working in collaboration and sharing our expertise so that we can make an ever-bigger impact.



## Quantock Eco

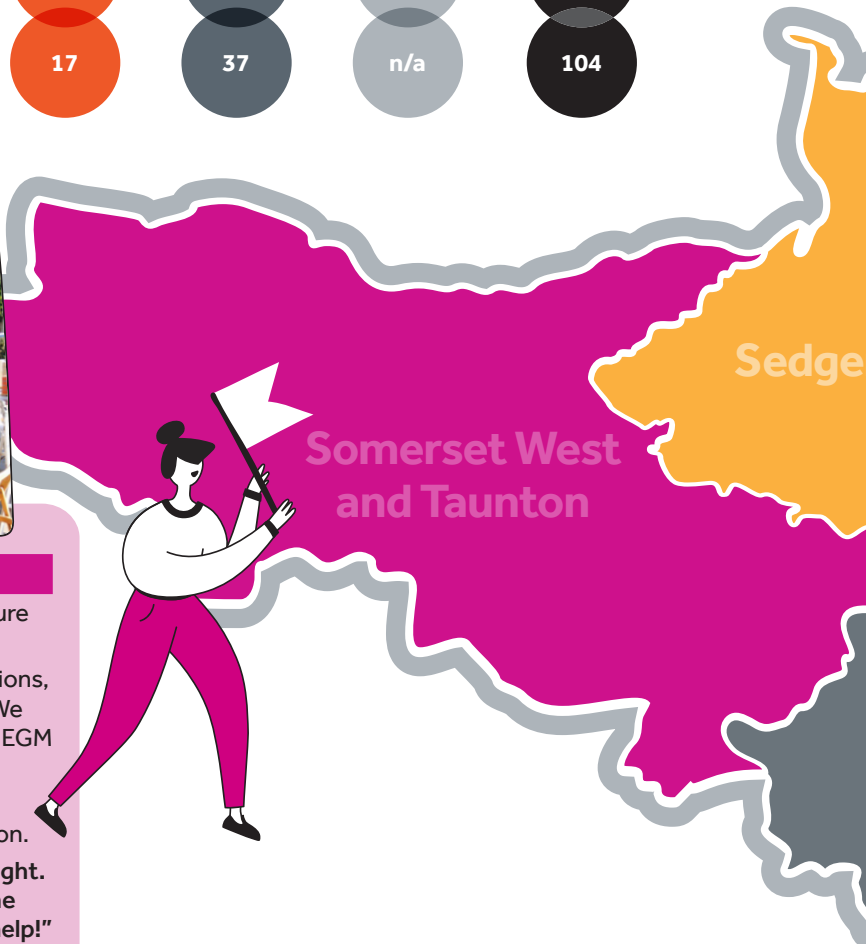
Quantock Eco needed support to change their legal structure to a CIO.

We reviewed their constitution, made some recommendations, and suggested several areas they may wish to reconsider. We also advised on the next steps to take, including holding an EGM and registering with the Charity Commission.

The group now have a new constitution that is fit for purpose and awaiting approval from the Charity Commission.

**"Jenny made it much, much easier for us to get our task right. We may well call on Spark Somerset again, but for the time being thank very much. We couldn't have asked for better help!"**

**Julian Anderson, Chairman, Quantock Eco**





### Nether Stowey Active Living Group

We have been supporting the Active Living Groups across the county, delivering Forums for the coordinators. The groups, which connect older people, have been hit especially hard during the pandemic, so they have appreciated the chance to talk to us and each other:

"I found the meeting last week very helpful in thinking about how we start back with our Wednesday Club and following that we had a very productive Committee Meeting the next day, so we are all set to restart the Coffee Mornings as before lockdown, with a view to starting back full time in September. Many thanks for your support of the Active Living Groups."

Maggie Harrison, Wednesday Club, Nether Stowey



### Shepton Together

Spark has been a key partner in the set-up of a new befriending scheme in Shepton Mallet. Along with Health Connections Mendip, MHA Communities and Shepton Mallet Town Council, we facilitated a series of meetings to gauge community interest and begin the process of forming a group to run the project.

The group now runs a weekly drop in session and supports 27 people on a regular basis with a waiting list to support more. We're working with them to recruit more volunteers.

"Having sought help and guidance, the Active & In Touch model was set up and called Shepton Together. This is now going from strength to strength with the only constraints being volunteers and additional funds, both of which Spark are supporting us with."

Dougie Brown, Active and In Touch Manager



### ACE Arts and Central Somerset Outdoor Learning Partnership

When Somerset Community Foundation invited bids for their Corona Response and Recovery Fund, Spark Advisor, Penny, approached ACE Arts and Central Somerset Outdoor Learning Partnership to make sure they were aware of the fund and explore ideas for relevant projects.

We supported them with the completion of a successful bid which secured £3,000 for a Woodland Wellbeing project. The grant provided five, art-based activity sessions for 12 participants to spend time in Hallr Woods, exploring their experiences of the pandemic and building their resilience. These were then followed by two sessions involving local school children who worked with the art to create stories and play scenarios to understand their lockdown experiences and provide positive memories. The project involved four volunteers and directly benefitted 72 people.

"What started as a group to which people brought their experiences of real pain, grief, isolation and struggle, over the weeks offered a space of sharing, support, joy and creativity."

Cealia Lunniss, Central Somerset Outdoor Learning Partnership

# Never more needed

We have been overwhelmed by the community response to the pandemic. Within days of the start of the first lockdown, dozens of groups popped up around the county to help people in need. From shopping to prescription pick-ups, friendly phone calls to hot meals, we are so grateful to the wonderful groups and passionate staff and volunteers who joined together to help.

In a year like no other, our team provided vital support for the network of 100+ newly established Covid support groups, by offering help and advice to manage volunteers and provide local help to communities. This included:

- A central point on our website to offer quick and easy access to all the latest guidance for Covid response groups.
- An online chat facility to make it easier for groups to contact us directly.
- A Facebook group of Covid-19 Group Coordinators to provide a space for them to network, address challenges, and share ideas and peer support.
- A confidential telephone support service for Covid-19 Group Coordinators, delivered by a qualified coach.

We also continued to support existing VCSE groups, but the focus of much of our work inevitably reflected the challenging circumstances in which we all found ourselves.



## A range of support

Crewkerne Community Church had just set up a local 'Be A Good Neighbour' scheme when the lockdown started. Like many Covid groups, they quickly mobilised with volunteers delivering food and prescriptions to vulnerable people. They have a professional kitchen which they used to prepare meals but needed a modest amount of funding in order to continue. They also wanted to start a befriending service.



We worked with the group to successfully apply for £2,500 and advised them on making an application to become incorporated. Their volunteers also wanted a better understanding of mental health as they were supporting vulnerable people, so we arranged for ten of them to attend Mental Health First Aid training. We also discussed how their phone befriending service was operating, including dealing with safeguarding concerns.

The funding has secured the medium-term future of the meals service. Their volunteers are now more confident when encountering people with mental health issues, understand the boundaries of their role and know what other support is available.

**"Spark Somerset's support has been very helpful in both securing funding and advising us on operating safely."**

Stephen Gray, Group Leader, Crewkerne Community Church



### Online befriending for children

Purple Elephant in Frome offer a range of support and activities to vulnerable families and children, culminating in the annual Children's Festival. Most of their services had been restricted during Covid and they had been looking for innovative ways to continue to offer help to their families.

They were successful in gaining funding to provide online befriending for children and were one of the first groups to offer such a service. We provided advice around GDPR, safeguarding and using video-conferencing and supported them in ensuring they were adhering to the Covid guidance in offering a safe space in family homes.

"The advice I was given by Spark was relating to our online befriending service, which supports children aged between five and 12 years old, who need a trusted adult and positive role model in their life, and a dependable friend! This was quite a new direction for us, so we needed guidance around working alone with children, working online and working with volunteers. We wanted to make sure that we got it right in terms of safeguarding, privacy and volunteer safety. "We've supported 12 children through the service for varying lengths of time and have six volunteers who are currently active with us. The advice you gave was very helpful and enabled us to choose the most appropriate way to deliver the service."

Sue Willis, Director, Purple Elephant



# Supporting sustainability

## Training and networking

Our forums and training workshops are a really popular and effective way of providing information and support to VCSE organisations, and also provide valuable networking opportunities. We ran a range of events, from workshops to bespoke training sessions, general community forums and events that focus on a specific theme.

In response to Covid-19, we had to adapt our approach, moving from face-to-face events to online webinars and meetings. We quickly created a webinar series to address urgent needs. We then sent a survey out in September which confirmed a clear, ongoing need for low cost, locally delivered training to address gaps in knowledge and expertise. Whilst this brought challenges in the short term, it has enabled us to reach out to far more groups than we would have been able to before.

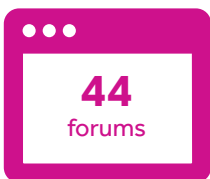
Whilst we're keen to resume face-to-face events, we've had our eyes opened to new digital possibilities which we're exploring.



"Thanks very much for the webinar this morning. It was really useful to have a professional's opinion on all this stuff. I think a lot of us are risk assessing activities and writing policies and we're not always doing this from an informed place, other than following the news and some quite often opaque government advice. It was great to have an overview of the practicalities but also the emotional needs of our staff and volunteers too."

Rupert Farthing, Carymoor Environmental Centre

## Key stats:



## Men's Sheds

The Men's Shed Forum was a particular success and Sheds who were looking at reopening were keen to continue meeting to share knowledge and learning as they started to prepare for the safe return of their members.

"The Spark Men's Shed Forum brings together like-minded people and facilitates dialogue and ideas to make positive differences for social inclusion in our communities. The benefits include helping us to remain active – within restrictions – during the pandemic and come out well-prepared to help and support people in the short, medium and long-term future."

John Ryves, Secretary, Axe Valley Men's Shed



Workshops	Attendees
In at the Deep End	63
Organising and Supporting Your Volunteers	19
Tools to Help You Organise	6
Finding Support From Home	17
Looking After Yourself	27
Looking After People's Data	6
Understanding Mental health and Building Resilience	9
Managing Your Charity in a Remote Environment	7
Effective Volunteer Management	5
Improving your Charity's Reach and Marketing	12
Mental Health First Aid	37
Adult Safeguarding	13
Operating a Covid Secure Environment	19
Dementia Friends Training	15
Emergency First Aid at Work	19
Child Protection Basic Awareness	14
Finance Training	8
Measuring Impact	21
Managing Volunteers	20
Trustee Training	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>361</b>



## Funding and sustainability

During 'normal' times, most groups come to us needing funding support.

In a year like no other, groups have focussed on emergency planning and survival, rather than planning ahead, therefore, the support we were asked to provide has been much more about resilience, governance and adapting to Covid.

More recently, we have seen a marked increase in demand for funding support, as groups begin to turn their minds to recovery. The Spark Funding Team has provided free funding support via our website and social media and has sent regular updates to groups on the latest funding opportunities. We have also advised organisations on applying for funds, provided bespoke training and run a bid checking service.

"The support Children's World has received from Spark has been fantastic! New funders were suggested and have since given us great financial support. We also received excellent support with bid writing, which helped a lot when we were short of time and struggling to complete all the applications on our own. This also brought in funds. Couldn't recommend Spark highly enough!"

Kristen Lindop, formerly of Children's World



## Support for South Somerset

"Since ARK's inception, Spark has regularly advised us of the funding options available and provided advice and guided where needed. We wanted to apply to Somerset County Council for funding to set up a support service for those experiencing dementia and memory loss and their carers. We had no experience of applying to the council for funding, but with support, guidance and training from Spark, we successfully submitted an application for funding.

It's particularly helpful to be able to contact Spark when seeking funding for a specific project as they come back to us with a number of funders, who would support that kind of activity.

I have no doubt that without the help, support and guidance of the Spark Funding Team, ARK would be in a very different financial position."

Nigel Bell, ARK at Egwood



## So far...



**£352,226**

raised for  
local groups  
(so far)



**121**

groups  
supported



**100%**

of Live Chat  
funding enquiries  
rated 'Excellent'

# Opportunity to thrive

At Spark Somerset, we believe that everyone should have the opportunity to thrive. So, we work with local partners to provide volunteering opportunities for all.

When Covid-19 struck in March 2020, it was clear that there needed to be a community wide response – and in Somerset this happened almost overnight. We saw a surge of ‘people-power’ in our communities, with thousands of local residents giving up their time to support those most in need.

In a year like no other, many ‘business as usual’ volunteering opportunities were curtailed due to Covid-19 restrictions. However, different ways of helping communities emerged instead, including shopping, dog walking and friendly phone calls to those self-isolating. Within 2 weeks of lockdown we stood up a digital platform, Corona Helpers, where local groups could recruit and manage their volunteers.

During the summer, we launched Spark a Change, a new digital platform which offered greater functionality, ease of use and efficiency for both groups and potential volunteers. The system went live in September 2020 and featured over 250 organisations and 450+ opportunities migrated across from the old system.

“Spark a Change offers an effective means of recruiting volunteers. It is easy to interact with potential volunteers through the messaging system and the ability to share the opportunity directly to social media pages is a useful feature. Chloe has been really helpful and answered any queries I have had. We have just added some new roles to the site and are hoping to have a similar success with these!”

Leonie Girling, Operations Coordinator, Chard Watch CIC

Spark a  
Change

## Key stats:



**3,020**  
volunteers  
registered



**1,112**  
volunteering  
opportunities  
promoted



**383**  
groups  
signed up

## South Somerset GP Helpers scheme

Having discovered a lack of support for lonely or isolated people, our Social Prescribing Coordinator, Matt, worked closely with the local Health Coaches to create a GP Helpers scheme whereby volunteers support lonely or isolated patients in South Petherton to regain their confidence and connect with their communities by making friendly phone calls and home visits, accompanying them to community activities and providing transport.

The scheme has now helped several patients and is being rolled out in GP Practices in Queen Camel and Milborne Port.

Jill, one of the patients helped by the scheme explains, “talking to and regularly meeting Sarah, has really helped me, especially during lockdown when it was so quiet. It’s been nice to get to know someone new in the village, and I’ve enjoyed our trips out to nearby towns where we have coffee together. It’s been a real help at a difficult time.”

Sarah, the GP Helper said; ‘It’s great to meet someone new to do things with. It’s been good for me too!’



## Spark Somerset supported the Somerset Vaccination Programme



We helped to recruit over 1,200 volunteers for the county vaccination sites and recruited volunteers for local GP surgeries.

Within 2 weeks of lockdown we stood up a digital platform, Corona Helpers, where local groups could recruit and manage their volunteers at the main county sites, GP-led sites and community pharmacies and fed into regional and national conversations around volunteering.

"I want to say a huge thank you to all the volunteers who have answered the call and are playing a key part in Somerset's vaccination programme.

It has been a real team effort with councils and partners across Somerset pulling out all the stops to support the NHS with this mammoth task.

So much has been achieved but we have a long way to go and the role of volunteers will be crucial as the programme continues over the coming weeks and months. Together we will beat this virus and the spirit shown gives us real hope for the future."

Councillor Clare Paul, Somerset County Council Cabinet Member for Public Health



### Meghan's story

"Since graduating from university in the middle of the pandemic and not being able to work my normal job in hospitality, I found I had plenty of free time which I wanted to put to good use.

Volunteering at the vaccination centre is so rewarding. Welcoming people to the racecourse and then seeing them leave, so happy and relieved to have had their vaccination, gives me a real sense of achievement.

Volunteering has definitely improved my wellbeing and helped me keep a positive mindset during lockdown, it's given me something good to focus on and made me realise that I really am making a difference to so many people's lives!"



### Jane's story

When we put a call out for volunteers to support the county vaccination Centres earlier this year, over 1,200 people signed up. One of whom is Jane, who has been volunteering as a Marshal at the Taunton Racecourse Vaccination Centre since January 2021.

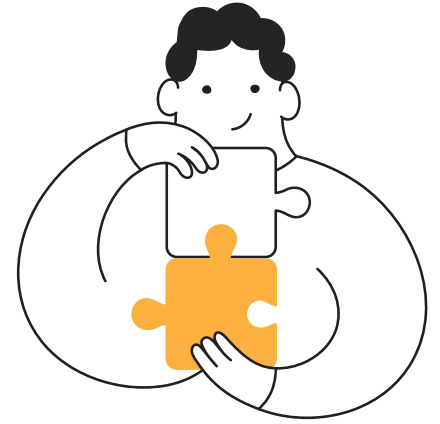
"As soon as I saw the request for volunteers, I put in my application. I'm a very social person. I love the company of others and love organising. I felt the need to do something, to contribute in some way to help get things moving in the right direction.

The nurses and vaccinators tell us that they couldn't do it without us which has made me feel useful and certainly helped my mental wellbeing."



# Better together

We continue to play a key representative role in Somerset. Since we extended our services countywide in April 2020, our reach has increased significantly. Covid-19 has really highlighted the value of the voluntary and community sector, enabling us to build even stronger relationships with the NHS and local authorities, and ensuring that the voice of the VCSE really is being heard.



With limited resources available for the sector, an inevitable increase in demand, and many VCSE organisations struggling to adapt and survive, going forward, we see the support of collaboration and partnership building being a key priority for our team.

As a Countywide charity that avoids engaging in direct service delivery in communities, we are in a unique position as we can work at scale, sharing our expertise, making connections, advocating on behalf of the sector, and building partnerships to make an even bigger impact.

## Somerset Youth Work Alliance

Somerset Youth Work Alliance, coordinated by Spark Somerset, is now developing to bring together youth work providers from across the county – big and small, town and village based, those with paid workers and those run by volunteers. The aim is to achieve the best possible outcomes for young people across the whole county by agreeing to work collaboratively, listening to young people, sharing knowledge, skills and strengths with each other, and combining to positively influence the sector and systems in which we work.

**“Spark’s infrastructure role in the County is crucial for us. Without this, the public sector would simply be dealing with hundreds of third sector organisations with differing views, competing agendas and many varied priorities. I cannot begin to imagine how true third sector/public sector collaboration could ever work in Somerset without Spark.”**

Phil Dolan, CEO of Age UK Somerset

**“Many thanks Penny and Alice. You guys at Spark are ideal to facilitate this... neutral and knowledgeable.”**

Craig Lloyd, Director / Youth & Community Worker, Youth Unlimited CIC

## Open Mental Health

Spark Somerset have a key role as Chair of the Alliance. Through this work, we have played a part in strengthening relationships between the VCSE and Health. A key premise of this alliance is also the development of ‘generous leadership’, where we work together collaboratively to develop the sector in Somerset and support communities, not just to grow our own organisations.

Although undoubtedly challenging, given the range of services engaged in this alliance (ranging from very small local organisations to a very large national charity) we are keen to learn from this experience, with the possibility that the model could be replicated elsewhere.

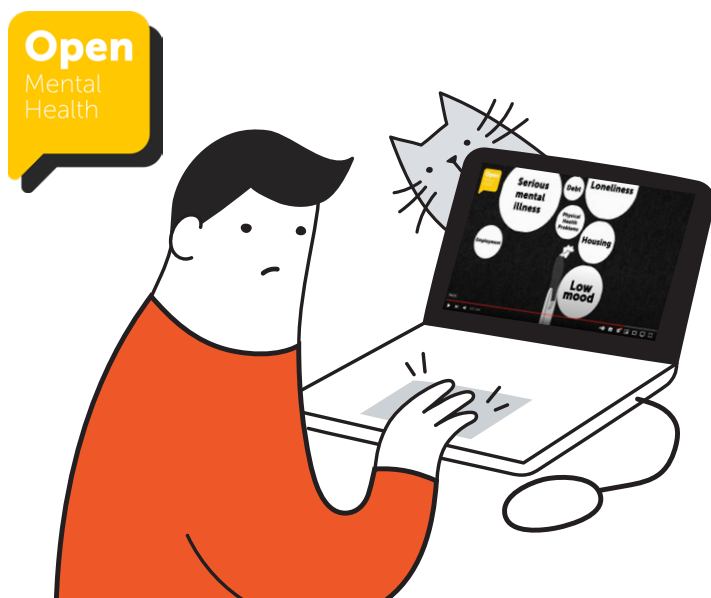
**“Spark’s role has been key within the VCSE Mental Health Alliance. As a non-delivery partner this has put them in an invaluable position as independent Chair. Just to mention three of the areas where they have really helped: their in-depth knowledge and understanding of partners, their skills in resolving conflict situations, strength of character and respect within the VCSE to hold this partnership to account. Well done, Spark!”**

Paula Blight, CEO of SWEDA

**“I have worked with Spark on many different projects over the last year and have seen the huge benefit that they provide to communities across Somerset. Their approach has always been inclusive, looking at how to work with others to deliver the outcomes required.**

I have been particularly impressed with the way that Katherine and the team worked so hard to develop the consortia which is at the forefront of delivering the Open Mental Health programme. She and the team worked hard in very challenging circumstances to develop the right approach to how the differing and, previously sometimes competing organisations could come together under one banner. This has resulted in the fantastic results we have already seen, highlighted by NHS England as truly transformational and leading best practice nationally.”

Karen Prosser, Director of Commercial Development, Strategy and Partnerships, Somerset NHS Foundation Trust



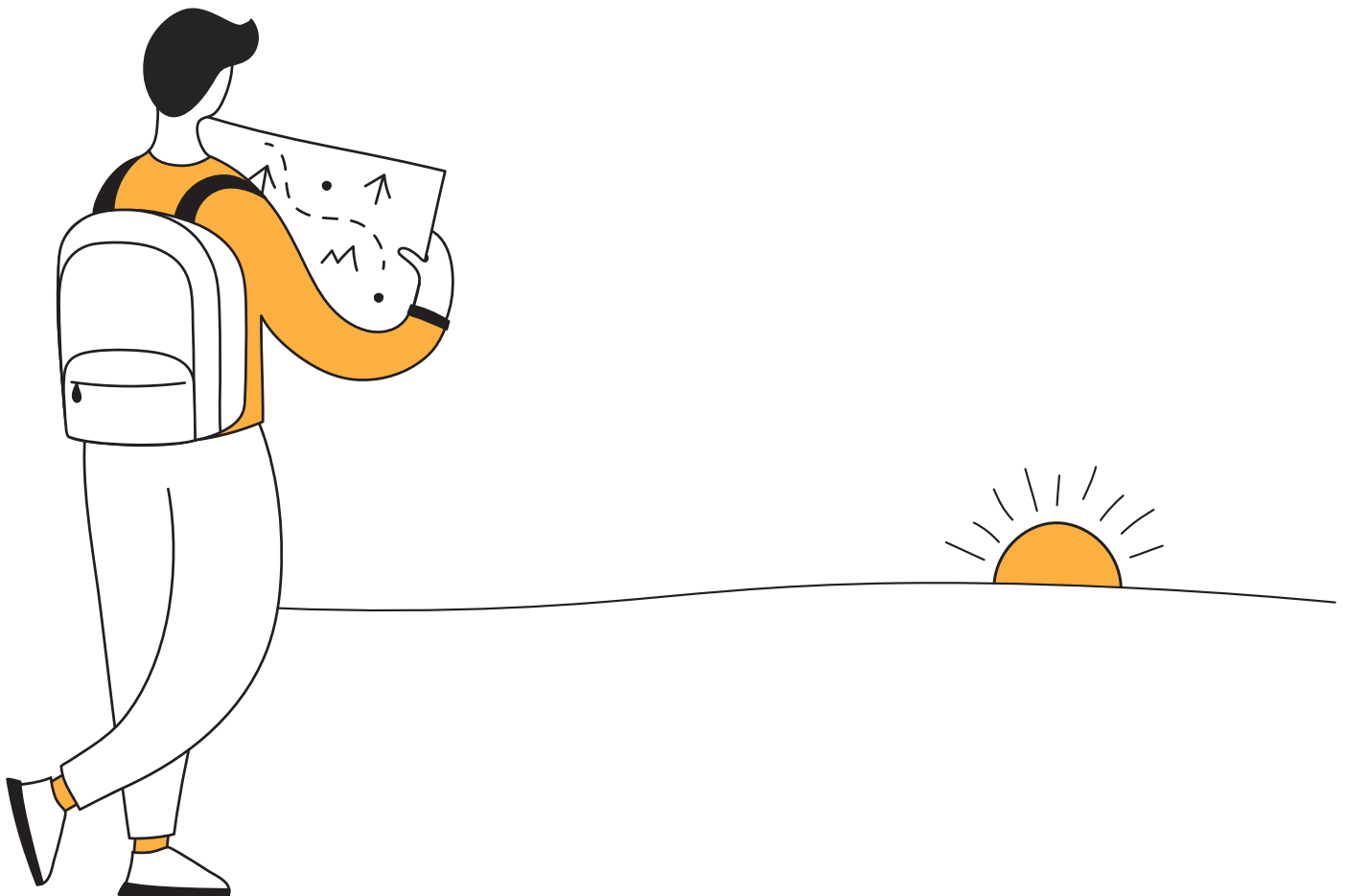
# Looking ahead

Although the future is uncertain for many charities and community groups, our team remains passionate about supporting local VCSE organisations to be confident, resilient and to have the tools they need to thrive now and into the future.

Never before have there been such demands on our sector – distinctive and diverse, local VCSE groups support individuals in need who don't always require a formal 'intervention', are there for those who fall between the cracks and also work with people who are on the road to recovery. The VCSE sector is often a crucial point of stability for our local communities. However, as the environment around us shifts in the wake of Covid-19, this stability is needed more than ever. Therefore, it is vital for the VCSE sector to be properly supported.

In addition to the challenges we face as we emerge from Covid, we know that lots of charities and community groups have concerns about many other external factors too – the environment, digital divide, Local Government Reform, Brexit, development of the Integrated Care System – and have a sense of trepidation regarding how their organisation will fair in this uncertain future.

Covid-19 has shone a light on the importance of the VCSE sector – it is certainly not an overstatement to suggest that we wouldn't have got through the last year without it. Therefore, it is vital for the VCSE sector to be able to engage effectively and strategically with partners across Somerset to address the challenges that we all face.



# Thank You!

Our heartfelt thanks go to the many groups across the county and to the wonderful staff and volunteers we work with on a daily basis. We are extremely proud of our relationships and look forward to continuing our work to build stronger, more resilient communities so that Somerset residents have the opportunities they need to be happy and healthy.

**Thank you to the funders and partners who continue to support our vital work. It is very much appreciated.**



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**SOMERSET**  
INSPIRING COMMUNITIES



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