

2021-2022

EVALUATION REPORT:

Bearwood Community Hub

Bearwood Community Hub CIC

THANK YOU...

to our Board of Directors, partners, funders, donors, volunteers, consultants & all of our supporters.

Partners:



GRAND UNION



Funders:



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ABOUT THE HUB:

Bearwood Community Hub CIC is a not-for-profit, community-led social enterprise fostering collaboration and social action to improve wellbeing, livelihoods and the local urban environment.

The Hub was founded in Autumn 2019, and had a physical presence from July 2021 to October 2022 in the hall of St. Mary's Church on Bearwood High Street in Smethwick, Sandwell, providing an accessible and welcoming venue at the heart of the community. Since October 2022 the Hub services have been dispersed around several local businesses and premises, while staff look for a new, permanent home. Since sharing the news of moving out of the St Mary's Church building, there have been hugely supportive reactions from the local community, and premises were found quickly to house the majority of pre-existing Hub services.

Bearwood Community Hub provides front-line, transformative, tailored services to the people, communities and organisations of Smethwick and Bearwood, including social activities, material support, and personal and professional development opportunities which address the poverty, insecurity and isolation that much of Smethwick faces. Users are often keen to participate in the programming themselves, sharing their own experiences and skills.

Mission:

Bearwood Community Hub aims to consistently enable every person in Bearwood and surrounding areas to connect, collaborate and create in ways that are right and beneficial for them, and in ways that inspire and foster a greater sense of belonging, confidence, local ownership and autonomy.

Vision:

An open-to-all community hub. A place where everyone can connect, create and collaborate.

Values:

Everyone is welcome
Everyone is valued
Everyone has something to offer

ABOUT THE HUB:

The Hub is working towards making Bearwood and Smethwick:

- A community in which everyone has the opportunity to lead, own or participate in activity that connects, creates and fosters greater collaboration;
- A safe space to belong, where wellbeing and social needs are continually responded to and improved;
- A place of improved mental wellbeing, reduced isolation and a more physically active community;
- A more inclusive economy for all, which supports greater individual economic resilience and confidence.

LEADERSHIP & STAFFING:

Currently, 4 of the Hub's major projects are led by 7 individuals who are part of the global majority ethnically. Nearly all the subcontracted and employed staff, and volunteer base, are from backgrounds where economic disadvantage, neurodivergence or mental ill-health have meant that they are ordinarily seldom included.

In a recent Board audit of lived experience, 50% of the Directors confirmed that they have lived experience of one or more of the following that relate to the Hub's work: precarious financial, housing or family situations; 'newly arrived' or refugee status; social isolation or loneliness; homelessness; or belonging to an ethnic minority group.

Board of Directors:

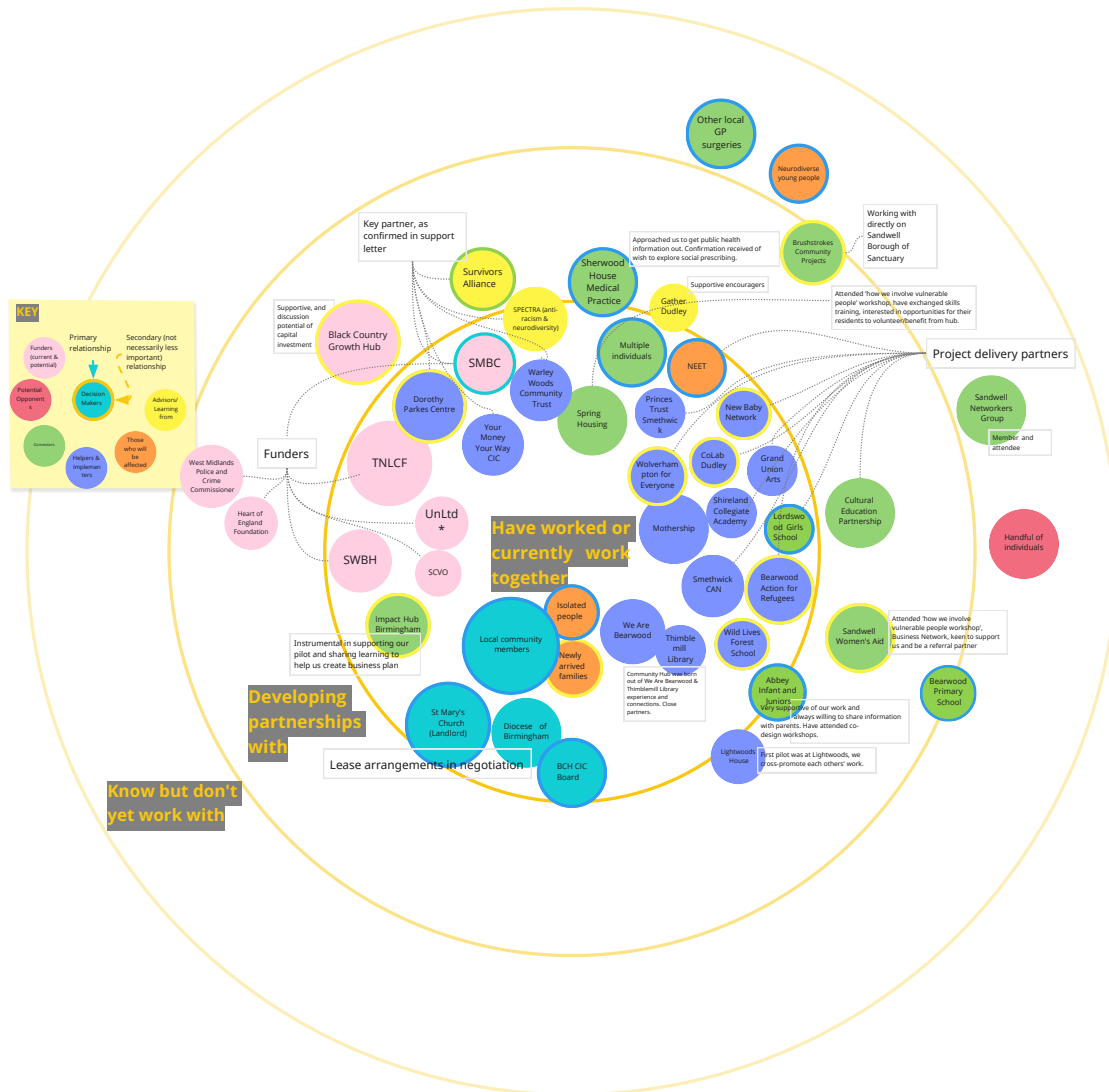
- Jo Capper
- Fatma Keskin
- Éadaoin Ilten
- Julie McKirdy MBE
- Amy Martin
- Pat Nimmo

Staff:

- Sally Taylor
- Natasha Comfort
- Jenny Sandford
- Maddison Stewart

STAKEHOLDERS

Bearwood Community Hub's Stakeholder Universe



Bearwood Community Hub is firmly embedded in the local and regional ecology of Smethwick and the West Midlands, and has developed and maintained long-standing relationships with direct project partners, neighbouring organisations, funders and supporters, including: Smethwick Food Bank, Brushstrokes Community Project, Dorothy Parkes Centre, Bearwood Action for Refugees, Mothership, Borough of Sanctuary Sandwell, Black Country Women's Aid, Agewell UK, and Sandwell MBC.

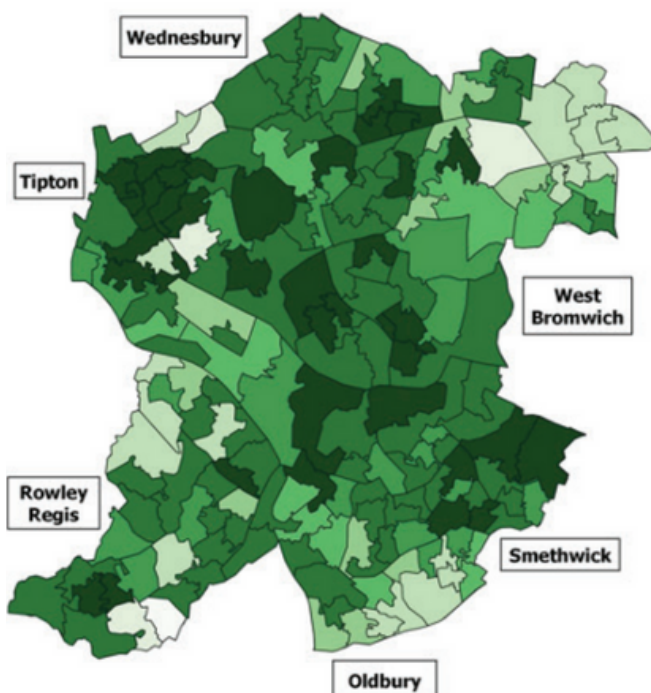
Increasing numbers of local agencies are asking to partner with the Hub which is expanding its abilities and reputation as a leading community navigator. Leadership of the Hub plays a driving role in a burgeoning inclusive economy cluster, working together with local CICs, the Black Country Social Enterprise Task Force, and community-minded businesses to drive wellbeing, creativity, development, education and training, and local growth.

LOCAL CONTEXT:

Over the last year the Hub has seen a significant rise in engagement from local residents, especially men, often in a situation of desperate need for assistance or signposting. As a consequence the Hub has needed to become more active and launch a number of new initiatives. The provision of useful, sensitive, frontline, human-to human connection has been transformative for many of the Hub's participants, either self-referred or referred by partners.

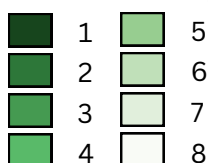
Hub leadership has learned how important it is to have a physical presence for people to come together: a place of community cohesion and, as many participants and contributors report, of belonging. The Hub is a front-line safety net for vulnerable people.

The economic and social need in Smethwick is severe and deep-rooted, with Sandwell noted as the most deprived region of the Black Country, and the 12th most deprived local authority nationwide, out of 137. Almost half of its LSOAs are in the 10% worst deprived in the country ([Sandwell Trends, 2019](#)).



IMD 2019 Deciles

1 is the most deprived



Smethwick has almost of its LSOAs in the 20% most deprived across the country, and while Bearwood has higher house prices and scores on indices of Income, Education, Skills & Training, and Employment, the Living Environment score is one of the most deprived in the Black Country. The local Abbey Ward foodbank has noted a doubling of referrals over the past year.

The users of the Hub vary in area and background - coming from North Smethwick, North Edgbaston (in the 10% of most deprived wards in Birmingham) to the East and Old Warley to the West, often with a history of recent migration, financial insecurity or deprivation, and social isolation.

THEORY OF CHANGE:

The Bearwood Community Hub's Theory of change was developed through community consultation and engagement work carried out on the 'Make it happen' event. It consists of three pillars which inform the work we do, Art & Culture, Health & Wellbeing and Economic Resilience.

	Arts & Culture	Health & Wellbeing	Economic Resilience
Changes:	A community in which everyone has the opportunity to express, create and participate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced isolation • Improved mental wellbeing • A more physically active community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more inclusive economy for all
Target Group:	Those who have little or no access/experience of the arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People living in poverty • Newly arrived families & individuals • Children & young people • Socially isolated individuals & families • Men 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newly arrived families & individuals • Unemployed & in poor quality employment • Independent businesses & social enterprises • NEET
	Engagement work with men		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills development • volunteer to employee pathways

IDENTIFIABLE NEED:

The opportunity that the Hub brings to its users is connection:

Connection with services & local organisations

Providing aid, advice, signposting and access to the internet.

Connection to the Community

Allowing refugees, migrants, sanctuary seekers and new arrivals to find and make a home in the West Midlands, develop skills and take part in local activities.

Connection with Each Other

Preventing loneliness and hardship for young families, the elderly and the isolated.

Many of the Hub's services fill tangible gaps, including: the Listening Ear service, responding to inadequate mental health support; and intergenerational coffee mornings, enabling people from hugely diverse backgrounds to come together and build friendships. Other activities also respond to less tangible gaps, but instead create an ecosystem of complimentary projects which include volunteering, socialising, and learning and employment opportunities.

Services Delivered:

- Co-working
- Playscheme
- Free Shop
- Warm Wednesdays
- Coffee Mornings
- Community Garden
- SEND parenting surgeries
- Digital Skills Cafe
- Art Clubs
- Befriending
- Wellbeing Walks
- Community Bakery
- Stay & Play
- Social enterprise business development
- Listening Ear
- Emergency accommodation referrals
- Foodbank referrals
- Signposting to services for refugees and asylum seekers

FRONTLINE SERVICES (WITH LEGACY)

Connection with services &
local organisations

Health & Wellbeing

Bearwood Community Hub provides support for the most vulnerable members of the community, including:

- Emergency accommodation referrals
- A free mental health listening service and referrals to counselling services
- Signposting to local services for refugees and asylum seekers
- SEND parenting surgeries
- Assistance for people experiencing homelessness and food poverty
- A free holiday playscheme for children on free school meals (Sandwell MBC funded)



A local woman came into the Hub having been street homeless for five days. She was given food and a warm drink, and emergency accommodation was arranged for her (with transport to it). Another woman came in seeking cash, which based on her appearance and distress was assumed to be for a drug problem. She was provided with breakfast, a hot drink and a new set of clothes.

The Hub has engaged with MPs twice to advocate for improvements to families' lives, and multiple housing issues have been improved or resolved through advocacy to Sandwell Council. A welcome, listening ear, life coaching and emergency medical care have been provided to multiple people in distress.

"A huge thank you...You welcomed us into your hub to support a gentleman going through a very difficult time. We would have been lost without it. Your kindness has made a world of difference to him and enabled us to support him further."

- Christina Murray, Community Navigator, St Albans CC

REDUCING ISOLATION

Connection to the
Community

Connection with
Each Other

Arts & Culture

Health & Wellbeing

The Hub provides a range of activities, clubs and events from Monday–Friday most weeks except school holidays. These include co-working, Stay and Play, a coffee morning, wellbeing walk, community lunch, and the Listening Ear service. These events have been developed at the request of the community and attract varied participants, many of whom deeply value the opportunity to socialise and meet new people.

"I have never felt so welcomed. As soon as I walked in I felt I'd found my place."

A local retired lady who visited the Hub to pick up bread from the bakery asked what other events happen there, as she had not been able to socialise much since her husband became ill. She stayed for a cup of tea and got talking to some volunteers, as well as a recent arrival from Iraq. She expressed a desire to attend an art club and so this idea was put into action, beginning with a planning workshop and ending in a weekly art group, attended by the local lady and 10 others.



"The Hub makes me less isolated. I'm a single parent, my daughter has a complex disability. I wasn't able to meet local families through usual stay and play/nursery/school networks. Pre having my daughter I worked & the gap not being able to work had a huge impact on my mental & also physical health. The Hub team are supportive of my whole situation. It's like a family, a happy and safe space."

REDUCING ISOLATION



“The chance to learn from other people and meet people I wouldn’t have met before”

A member of the congregation at St Mary’s comes to coffee morning every week and plays chess with one of the home-schooled children. He values this intergenerational relationship and “the chance to learn from other people and meet people [he] wouldn’t have met before”. He described the sense of welcome and atmosphere of belonging at the Hub, saying “we’re all parts of the same body”.

Hub users express their belief that the Hub is a catalyst for good things happening.



“In a coffee shop you’re still alone, here you talk to people.”

UPSKILLING

Connection with services
& local organisations

Connection to the
Community

Economic Resilience



Through the training and development support and activities available at the Hub, excellent opportunities have been provided for voluntary work experience, adult learning and employment.

“It has helped me find out who I am.”

A Kurdish asylum seeker and former teacher from Iraq volunteered at the Hub playscheme and then used the Hub to study for her teaching assistant qualification. Hub staff put her in touch with local schools which enabled her to get a placement. She continued volunteering at the Hub and gets support with navigating the further education system and completing assignments which she finds difficult due to her struggles with the English language.

There is evidence of a hugely positive impact for volunteers in terms of sense of belonging, ability, purpose, and self-esteem. One of the regular volunteers had been applying for jobs and not getting them because of her age, leaving her feeling like she had nothing to offer. Volunteering gave her confidence again, the knowledge she is good at something and has useful skills. She stated that this had a positive impact on her mental health and gave her a “social glow”.

Multiple users state that they have been able to learn from the experiences of others through ideas sharing and open conversations, challenging their unconscious bias.

Hub users also report a growth in self-knowledge and other informal learning due to interacting with diverse people in a place where curiosity is permitted.

PROVIDING A SENSE OF BELONGING

Connection to the Community

Connection with Each Other

Arts & Culture

Health & Wellbeing

Through the Hub's work with local partners Bearwood Action for Refugees, Mothership and Borough of Sanctuary Sandwell, many of its users are refugees or recently arrived in England. For these users the sense of belonging, access to advice and support, and informal learning opportunities are hugely important.



The coffee morning was set up by a Turkish immigrant so that she would have the opportunity to contribute to the community, meet people, and practise her English. This event is frequented by other non-English users including a new arrival from the Ukraine who wanted help to learn the local accent and find out about how things work in England.

The Community Bakery is a woman-led social enterprise project, set up in collaboration with a group of Sanctuary Seeking women in Sandwell. They are originally from Iraq, Morocco, Albania, Nigeria, Turkey, Sudan and South Africa and bring a rich, diverse range of culinary knowledge and tradition.

“We are making here a family house.”

“The Hub is a force for good in Bearwood, it brings people together and reaches out to the community.”

PROVIDING A SENSE OF BELONGING

One of the bakery staff members was referred by the Community Navigator at the Dorothy Parkes Centre as a newly arrived single mother of three. She is now an integral part of the team who helps to teach other participants to bake. Through Hub support she has now found a paid job. She has reflected:

“I felt so alone in my street, my neighbours are quite closed. But here I have found you wonderful women. I have found my family.”



Fig 1. Participant Responses to "Why do you take part in Bearwood Community Bakery?"

PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT

Connection with services & local organisations

Economic Resilience

The Hub supports social enterprise development and makes space available to job seekers and students needing help.

The Hub offers support formally and informally to many users seeking employment. The Community Bakery has developed into a profitable business, providing valuable skills and experience to newly arrived women. The co-working space supports the Hub's income and enables isolated people to connect with others and have a space for focused work. Users describe it as "literally a career-saving space" and "a community working environment".

The Hub supports social enterprise development and makes space available to job seekers and students needing help. When based at St Mary's Church the Hub was home to two local businesses: STS Medics Ltd and Black Country Touring, and has supported numerous start up enterprises.

A single mother, a qualified pharmacist from Iraq, needed to study and complete an apprenticeship placement in the UK before being able to practice. Staff and volunteers at the Hub supported her by identifying friendly local pharmacies who might be willing to take her on. They also provided an informal coaching service to support negotiations with her new employer and her childcare provider. She is now settled into her job.

The Listening Ear service was started voluntarily by a single mother of three while she was studying counselling and psychotherapy. Hub staff helped her write a successful funding application for the service which she now wants to expand to other locations and make full time. The service assists around 3 people per week and signposts to free, local, professional counselling services.



PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT



A bakery volunteer and single mother of four children, living in difficult circumstances and exceptionally poor housing, was supported to build her hair braiding business, navigate Universal Credit rules and regulations and was employed to clean at the Hub.

Two local high street businesses have reported that encouragement and guidance from Hub staff had a positive impact on them deciding to start their businesses. Two local CICs have been registered as a direct result of Hub support.

“It provides me with space in which to work, allowing me to get out of the house and establish a work/life balance for both myself, and my family.”



“We moved our office to the hub because we wanted to be part of a community-based organisation that shared similar values to ourselves. It's important for us not to be isolated, so the hub is a way of keeping us close to different groups of people. It has been very beneficial to us and we have worked together on projects as we have gone along...I feel closer to this local community as a result.”

IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH

Connection with services & local organisations

Connection to the Community

Connection with Each Other

Health & Wellbeing

Every single person spoken to at the Hub: users, staff & volunteers, reported that being there has been a positive impact on their mental health.

The Hub plugs a gap left by local deficit in mental health services, and as such it represents a considerable saving to the state. Over the last year Hub staff members have dealt with 4 disclosures of suicidal ideation, so now have formal procedures in place. Every single person spoken to at the Hub: users, staff & volunteers, reported that being there has been a positive impact on their mental health.

A local trans woman came to the Hub asking for experience in childcare to test whether she would enjoy further training. She became a regular volunteer, gaining in confidence and inclusion, and providing huge value in terms of capacity. She has had access to other support, including digital skills development and a foodbank referral at a time of financial crisis. Hub staff reported that through advocating for her to help at the playscheme, they were able to turn a conversation about being transgender from hostility from some parents to openness and acceptance that “everyone deserves a chance.”

Another user comes to the Hub several times a week to “hang out”. She has suffered abuse and is on the waiting list for therapy but relies on the Hub for company and support. She attends the coffee morning to chat to people and sits in the garden during good weather. Hub staff check in with her to ensure she is eating properly and taking care of herself. She was given clothes from the free shop so she had something smart to wear for Eid.



ENGAGEMENT:

There were nearly

5,000

visits to the Hub between July 2021 and March 2022.

There were nearly 5,000 visits to the Hub between July 2021 and October 2022. So far there have been 22 committed volunteers helping out, not including the additional 30 volunteers at events such as clearing the hall or the garden.

Single special events often prove popular – there were 70 visitors to the Living Memory Project ‘Our Commonwealth’ exhibition in July 2022.

Community members who engage with Hub activities and events are varied – mainly coming from the local Abbey Ward, to the west in North Edgbaston, and to the north in Smethwick, Soho & Victoria. The majority of service users hear about the Hub through word of mouth, either from partner organisations or from personal contacts with existing service-users or volunteers and staff. Increasingly during 2022 people dropped in off the High Street for a cup of tea, to find out about activities, or to request support and guidance.

Key participants and users include:

Parents of children on free school meals or who have additional needs

Sanctuary Seekers

Isolated individuals of all ages, including children

People of all ages experiencing mental ill health

Individuals & families in financial crisis

Social activators wanting support for impactful projects

Not-For-Profit partner organisations & local start-ups

ENGAGEMENT:

The Hub maintains a digital presence, through a regular newsletter, social media activity on Facebook, Twitter & Instagram, and a website.



Our new locations - come and see us!

Last week we told you all about our upcoming location change - all [here on our blog](#) if you missed it.

Now it's time to let you know about our new locations and timetable. We will have three new spaces, all of which we are excited to now confirm, and to welcome you to next week.

Stay & Play at Bear Bookshop

If you and your children enjoy our Stay and Play, we hope you'll love helping us to settle in on Monday mornings at Bear Bookshop! It's on the Bearwood Road, Hagley Road end shops close to the launderette, Tamu, Hello Coffee and the Halifax. Naomi will be there on 31st October to help us transition - and because we don't want to say goodbye to her! - and Jenny will host us, along with two of our lovely experienced volunteers. Come and see us there at 10am for play and (of course) stories!

Coworking at Bearwood Yoga

Bearwood Yoga, opposite the Post Office on Abbey Road, will be our new coworking home. It's a beautiful cosy space, a little swish with a neighbourhood feel. You will still be able to just turn up and work, just making payment through our website here. We have



RECOMENDATIONS:

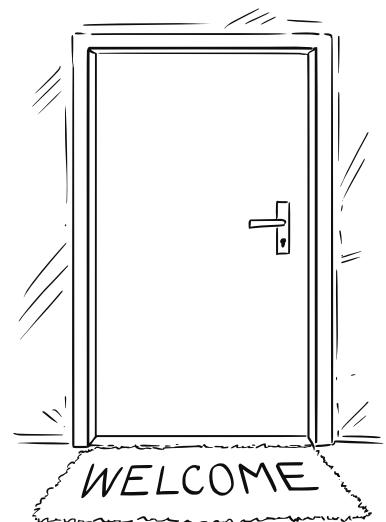
1. New permanent location for the Hub with stability and the opportunity for income generation

“There is a need to attract investors to something more ‘shiny’.”

Whilst still based at St Mary’s Church the Hub was facing issues with lack of adequate and flexible space, inability to house large events, and no dedicated private areas for staff to work. Now with the dispersed services housed in various locations around Bearwood, the need for a sustainable, flexible and permanent home for the Hub has intensified.

The Hub needs to consider operation models for dispersed services in the short term, to ensure strong partner relationships and sustainability of management, whilst scouting and planning for a permanent space. This new permanent location must be workable for multiple, disparate uses, including opportunities for income generation through co-working facilities, office leasing and event space rental. The new space must also have long opening hours to cater for the Hub’s increasing number of drop-in users. Increased income would allow the Hub to be less reliant on public funding, allowing for longer-term rather than project-led planning.

Despite the many and varied social enterprises, voluntary and community organisations and socially minded businesses in Smethwick, the area currently lacks a free ‘single front door’ through which local people can easily access all services at any time. Keeping all this activity under one roof would centralise social and material resources for Smethwick, maintaining permanent service in a place where previous community efforts have not become established long-term.



“I would like to see it firmly established as a valued part of community life...If it were secure it would feel free to be innovative rather than wondering all the time if they can afford to pay for it. They need security.”

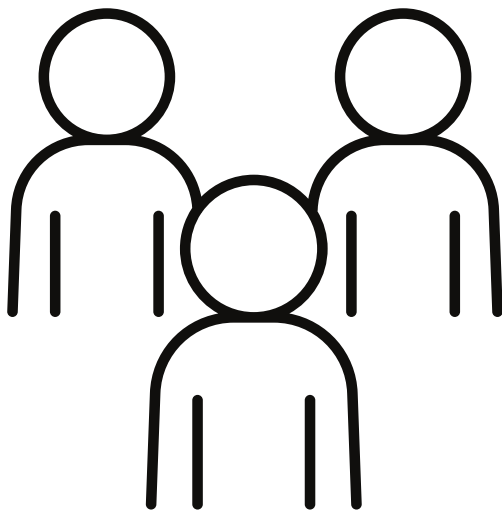
RECOMENDATIONS:

2. Further staffing to take pressure off the leadership role and enable strategic planning

There needs to be further staffing provision to enable the Director having to be involved in every level of the organisation. At the moment she is overworked, lacking time, energy and space to undertake a more strategic role. Because of this the core principles of the Hub are sometimes unclear and the activities and offer are potentially subject to mission creep.

The Hub is gaining in popularity and usage and now needs to focus as a business, with objective, analytical planning and structure. To do this the organisation cannot rely solely on volunteers, as shown during crunch points such as the Commonwealth Games.

There needs to be at least one new, paid role. This new staffing provision needs to cover administration, finance, HR and legal. Further staff would also enable potentially longer opening hours, including evening and weekend activities, which many current non-users of Hub reported would allow them to attend events.




“At the moment there’s a danger of being a little bit good at lots of things rather than excellent at a few things.”

“The Hub started small fry, but it’s getting bigger fry.”

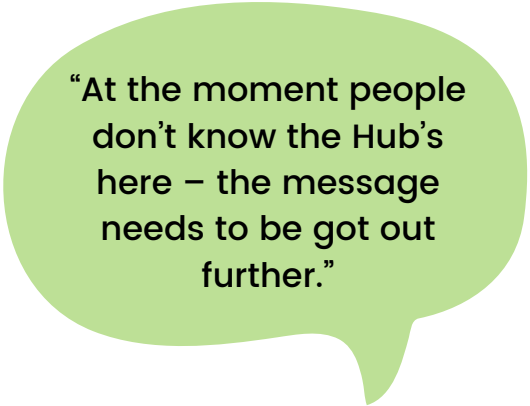
RECOMENDATIONS:

3. Professional marketing and communications advice leading to creation of a strategy and action plan

As the success of the Hub and its work continues to grow, its ability to reach new audiences should grow. This is taking place with support from neighbouring and partner organisations but also requires a more strategic approach from the Hub itself.



“Our current focus on social media and internet promotion means sections of the community are being left out.”



“At the moment people don’t know the Hub’s here – the message needs to be got out further.”

Users of the Hub all agree that marketing and communications could be better, and that more work should be done to reach sections of the community which do not currently make use of the space and its offer. However, opinions vary about what approach to take.

Users with knowledge of the local area suggest that use of the Hub would increase through targeted communications, as many Bearwood residents simply are not aware of the Hub’s existence.

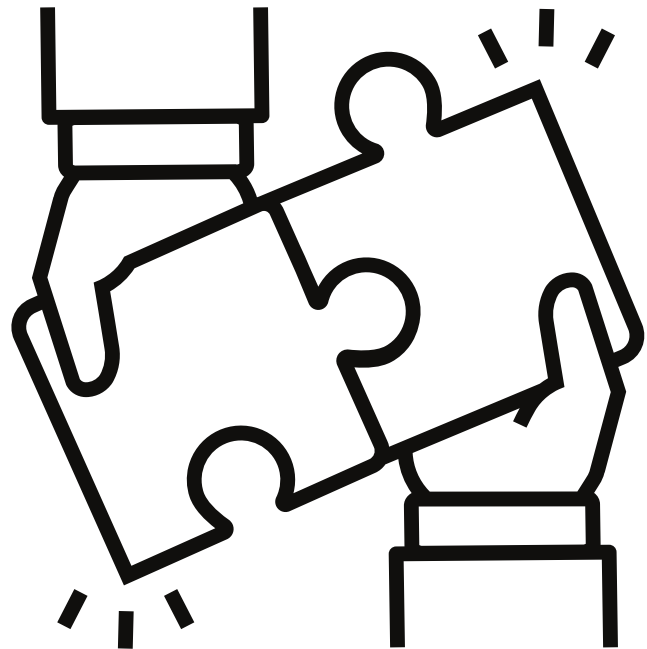
The Hub should employ a marketing and communications specialist to create an overarching marketing strategy, and roll out a flexible action plan to attract more users.

RECOMENDATIONS:

4. Create and strengthen local partnerships to enable greater audience reach and income generation

“There needs to be more collective working – uniting local organisations rather than being in competition.”

Prior to the Hub’s move out of the St Mary’s premises there was a need for the Hub to create stronger relationships with other local organisations, especially commercial enterprises which could offer access to larger audiences and the opportunity for income generation. There is currently a feeling that local organisations can tend to act in isolation or in competition, leading to lack of communication and lessened access to sections of the community.

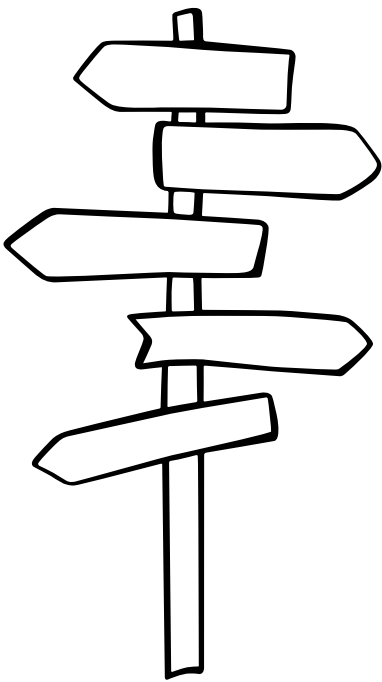


The move to a dispersed service has created and strengthened many relationships with local businesses including Bearwood Yoga, the Bear Bookshop, and Bearwood Indoor Market. It is now paramount that the Hub is able to retain and build on these relationships in the future.

The Hub’s links with local independent businesses can result in greater awareness of the Hub and its work, as well as boosting the local economy. Suggestions from users include partnerships with local coffee shops to offer a discount for Hub co-workers, or collaborative events with restaurants or community groups to target audiences currently not using the Hub.

RECOMENDATIONS:

5. Creation of a database of signposting resources and local events for hosts and welcomers so knowledge is not dependent on the presence of single individuals



Currently welcomers at the Hub spaces act as a first point of contact and first response for people looking for mental health support, help looking for work, a rest and refreshment, and even first aid assistance. Hub staff often refer users to other local and national organisations including food banks, social services, mental health services, homeless charities, emergency housing and support for refugees.

Many people using the space want to talk about their problems, but volunteers are often not trained or equipped to deal with situations such as these, and the knowledge and experience available to users is highly dependent on which staff members and volunteers are present at Hub spaces at any given time.

To ensure the availability of specialist knowledge, advice and signposting contacts at all times a database of expertise, contact details and signposting resources should be created, for use by hosts, welcomers and other volunteers. The database could also include an up-to-date calendar of local events. This information could be accessible through several devices across the dispersed Hub locations.

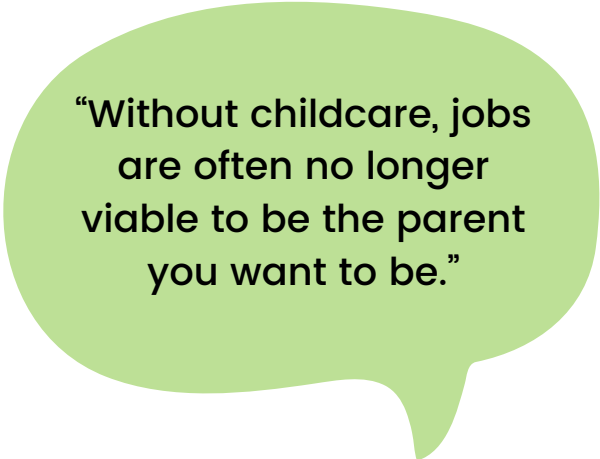
"Advice shouldn't be reliant on certain people being in at certain times."

RECOMENDATIONS:

6. Consider the sustainability of the co-working space and possible addition of regular child-care or creche facilities

The co-working space has historically been a good source of revenue for the Hub, but since relocation to the Bearwood Yoga premises, any income raised is given to the host business as rent.

Strategic thought needs to be given to the future of the co-working offer: it has many clear benefits in linking local businesses, reducing isolation in freelance and solo workers, and providing a level of financial sustainability for the Hub. Consideration now needs to be given to how to extend its reach and increase the number of users.



“Without childcare, jobs are often no longer viable to be the parent you want to be.”

Additionally, many users expressed a sentiment that use of the coworking facilities would increase if there was provision of a regular day-care or creche facility – this is currently housed in a different location, at the Bear Bookshop, and only available on a Monday.

The co-working and childcare facilities, and their relationship to each other, need to be given careful consideration when developing the dispersed service operation model and the future permanent location.