



Gloucestershire
Gateway
Trust



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Rich Holmes, Go Together

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APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

This report summarises the findings from an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process undertaken by Gloucestershire Gateway Trust and its partners to inform the design of a transformative learning and development programme. The AI process is rooted in a strength-based approach, exploring what already works well across the family hubs, youth services and community landscape in Gloucestershire and envisioning a future shaped by community-led practice, relational leadership, and collective resilience.



Credit: Families and artist, Rose Popay, create a vision for Children and Family Centres, funded by Together Gloucester.



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Introduction

As Gloucestershire Gateway Partnership assumes responsibility for delivering Family Hubs and Youth Services across Gloucester and the Forest of Dean, alongside strategic partners such as the Aspire Foundation in Cheltenham and Tewkesbury, this moment marks a significant opportunity. Together, the partnership is investing in a long-term cultural shift towards inclusive, participatory, and asset-based ways of working. The Appreciative Inquiry sought to gather insights from those closest to the work, practitioners, partners, and communities to shape a workforce development programme that supports this vision.

The findings offer a compelling call to action. They show that the foundations for change already exist in trusted relationships, community-led initiatives, and collaborative partnerships. The challenge now is to build on this momentum, embedding practices that foster belonging, shared ownership, and systemic transformation.

Context and Rationale

The Gloucestershire Gateway Partnership has secured an eight-year contract to lead the delivery of Family Hubs and Youth Services in Gloucester and the Forest of Dean. In parallel, the Aspire Foundation has taken on delivery responsibilities of Family Hubs in Cheltenham and Tewkesbury. These newly established partnerships are assuming roles previously delivered by Barnardo's, and together, they are seizing the opportunity to reimagine service provision through a community-led lens.

At the heart of this work lies a shared ambition: to nurture neighbourhoods where everyone is valued, where people have influence over the decisions that affect their lives, and where lasting, locally led solutions can take root. To support this, all partners are collaborating on the development of an ambitious and innovative workforce transformation programme—one that seeks not just to train staff, but to inspire a cultural shift towards relational, strengths-based practice.

This ambition is underpinned by an urgent societal need. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK is facing a mental health crisis of unprecedented scale. From rising stress-related absenteeism in the workplace (Mental Health UK, 2024) to record referrals of children for anxiety support, to increasing levels of isolation and anxiety among parents (Unicef, 2023), the effects of collective trauma are becoming increasingly visible. These challenges cannot be addressed through individual interventions alone. Instead, they call for systemic, relational responses that strengthen the social fabric of communities.

As Bessel van der Kolk and others have argued, healing happens through connection; supporting adult caregivers, so they in turn can support children. This requires environments where kindness, care, and community can flourish. This means looking beyond formal services and investing in the power of community relationships as mechanisms for healing and growth.

The proposed workforce development programme is designed to support this shift; from deficit-based to asset-based approaches, from service-driven to people-led support. Central to this is a commitment to co-creation: providing a flexible framework that can be adapted and shaped by those delivering and receiving services. By using Appreciative Inquiry to understand the existing strengths and shared aspirations across the partnership, this process has laid the groundwork for a programme rooted in the lived realities, values, and hopes of the people it seeks to serve.



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Method

This project used Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as the core methodology to explore and inform the future direction of this learning programme for Gloucestershire Gateway Trust and its partners. AI is a strengths-based approach to change that focuses on amplifying what is already working well within a system. Rather than concentrating on deficits or problems to be fixed, AI begins by identifying the positive core of individuals, organisations, and communities, using these strengths as a foundation to co-create a more desirable future.

The process followed the well-established 5D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry:

1. **Define** – Establish the focus and purpose of the inquiry in collaboration with stakeholders.
2. **Discover** – Uncover and share stories of success, strength, and what gives life to the system when it is at its best.
3. **Dream** – Envision bold possibilities for the future by building on these positive foundations.
4. **Design** – Co-create practical and creative strategies to bring these aspirations to life.
5. **Deliver (or Destiny)** – Commit to actions that sustain momentum and embed change.

AI is rooted in the principle that positive questions lead to positive change, and that the most effective and lasting transformation happens when people are invited to shape their own futures based on shared strengths, values, and aspirations.

To generate insights across the 5D cycle, we used a mixed-method approach to data collection, combining:

- An online survey, completed by over 115 stakeholders, to gather a wide range of perspectives on what is working well and what aspirations exist for the future.
- Focus groups, bringing together diverse participants to explore shared experiences and co-develop themes in a relational setting.
- Semi-structured interviews, enabling deeper reflection and the surfacing of rich, individual stories that highlight personal and organisational strengths.

Together, these methods ensured a participatory and inclusive process, rooted in learning 'with' rather than 'doing to', and guided by the principle that change emerges through relationship, reflection, and collective imagination.



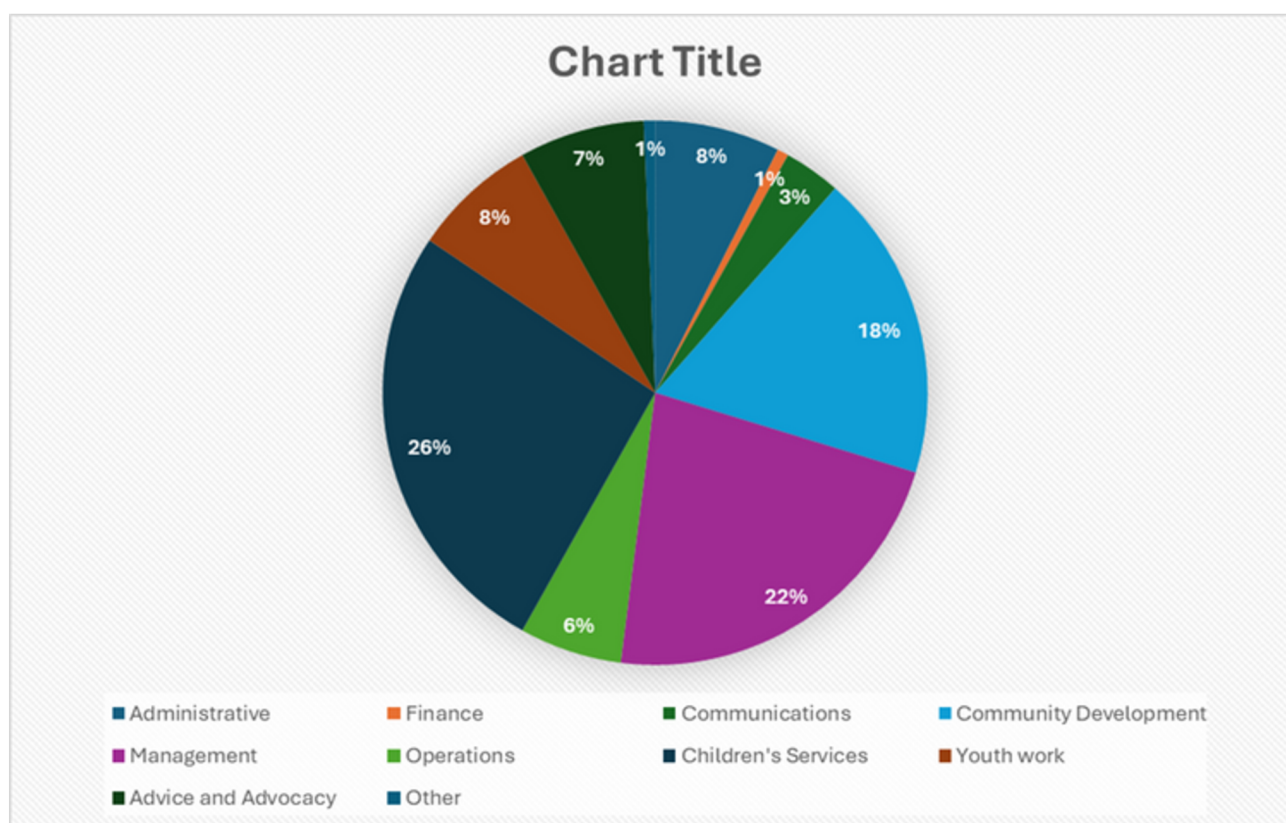


Results

We received a strong and encouraging response to the Appreciative Inquiry survey, with 115 individuals contributing their insights. This level of engagement reflects a significant appetite across the partnership for shaping its future collaboratively.

Of the total responses, 40 (35%) came from within Gloucestershire Gateway Trust, including 9 from the central team and 31 from the newly formed Family Hubs team. This suggests a high level of internal engagement, particularly from those directly involved in delivering frontline support. The second largest group of respondents was from Gloucestershire County Council, who contributed 12 responses (10.5%), highlighting the important role of statutory partners in the evolving collaboration. Additionally, 18 respondents selected the 'Other' category, indicating a broader network of contributors who identify with the partnership. Further to this we spoke to 15 individuals through focus groups and interviews.

Through the survey respondents were asked to describe their roles. As expected, the most common selection was 'Children's Services' (26%), aligning with the partnership's focus on early help and family support. However, participants were able to select up to two role categories (e.g. Children's Services and Management), allowing for a more nuanced picture of people's contributions and identities within the system. These are shown in the pie chart below.



The findings that follow are structured using the Appreciative Inquiry framework, highlighting key themes that emerged across the 5D cycle – Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver. These themes reflect both the strengths already present within the partnership and the collective aspirations for the future.



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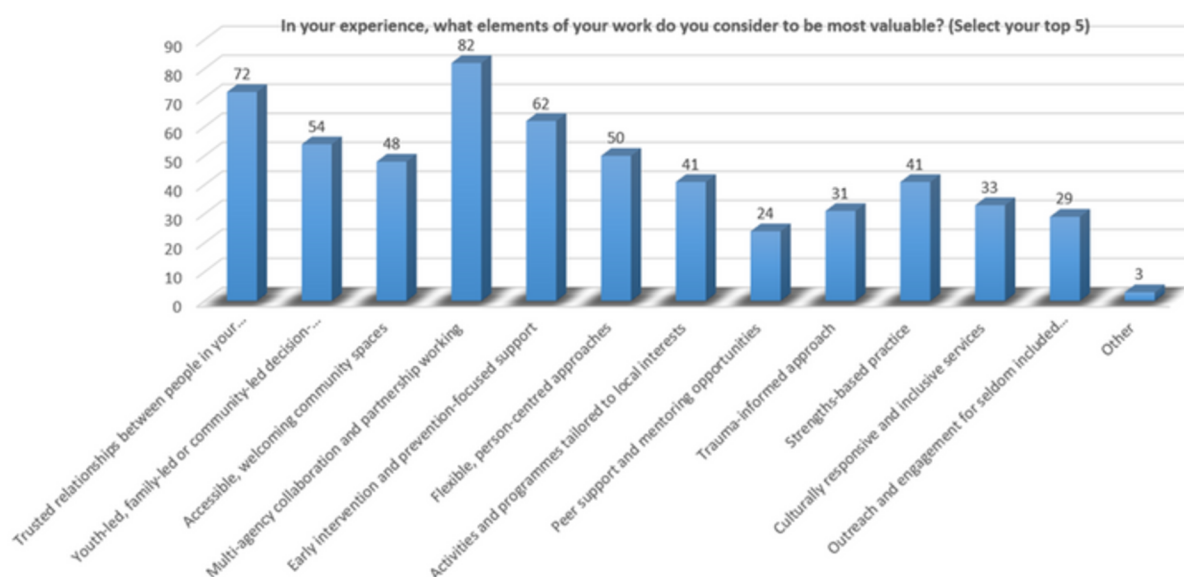
Discovery Phase

In the Discovery phase, we invited participants to reflect on the most valuable aspects of their work. The responses paint a compelling picture of a system rooted in relationships, equity, and shared leadership.

What Matters Most

When asked to select the top five elements they value most in their work, respondents consistently identified:

1. Multi-agency collaboration and partnership working
2. Trusted relationships between people in the community
3. Early intervention and prevention-focused support
4. Youth-led, family-led or community-led decision-making
5. Flexible, person-centred approaches



This points clearly to a shared aspiration for a relational system, one that invests in connections between agencies, professionals, and communities. Respondents emphasised that building relationships before they are needed is key to fostering trust, enabling flexible support, and creating the conditions for local ownership and shared decision-making.



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Discovery Phase

Respondents shared powerful stories of where community-led, youth-led, or family-led approaches had made a real difference. A striking 72% said they had witnessed such success, and when asked what made it work, six key themes emerged:

1. Trusting Relationships Are Foundational – Trust is at the heart of effective support. These relationships are built over time, based on respect and human connection, not on transactional interactions or organisational targets.

“Relationships are everything.”

“It worked by keeping families engaged longer, not just for the services provided but for the trusted adults and relationships that were built.”

2. Participation and Co-Production Empower Change – Communities thrive when they are involved from the outset – designing, shaping, and leading their own solutions.

“Community input from the very start and throughout.”

“The family was able to identify their own needs and how they would like the situation to look.”

3. Strengths-Based, Inclusive Practice – A focus on assets, rather than deficits, fosters confidence and resilience. Many participants shared examples of inclusive, low-barrier activities that encouraged connection and empowerment.

“Our peer support group moves away from staff-led to peer support and skills sharing.”

“Creativity in gathering the voices of those not always heard.”

4. Safe, Accessible, Non-Stigmatising Spaces – Informal, welcoming environments, such as community cafés, drop-ins, and open events made it easier for families to engage on their own terms.

“It’s important that we make our spaces welcoming and non-judgemental.”

“The idea was to show this is open for everybody, not just those in crisis or referred in.”

5. Values-Driven, Authentic Leadership – Success often came down to individuals who led with heart, integrity, and lived understanding of their communities.

“The people behind it, their values and drive.”

“Having someone who represented their community leading the work.”

6. Cross-Sector Collaboration with Purpose – Genuine partnership working, grounded in mutual respect and shared values was seen as an enabler for all of the above.

“Buy-in from all partners... good communication between agencies.”

“Partnership working is amazing... it brings so many benefits.”

Summary

These reflections demonstrate that relational infrastructure is prioritised as much as physical or financial resources. Community-led success is not just about what we do, but how we do it, with humility, with care, and in deep partnership with those we serve.



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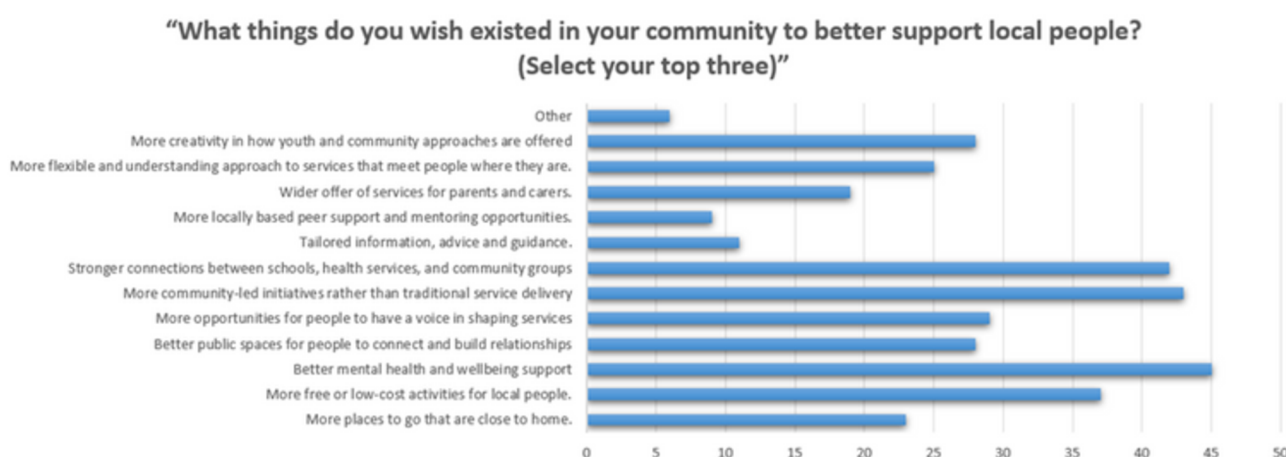
Dream Phase – What’s possible?

The Dream phase surfaced a powerful collective vision: one rooted not in the expansion of services, but in a reimagining of community life – where relationships, trust, and local agency form the foundation of support.

We asked respondents “What things do you wish existed in your community to better support local people? (Select your top three)”

The top three answers were:

1. Better mental health and wellbeing support
2. More community-led initiatives rather than traditional service delivery
3. Stronger connections between schools, health services, and community groups



While “better mental health and wellbeing support” was the top survey response, the desire expressed in interviews and focus groups wasn’t simply for more clinics, but for deeper connections.

1. Wellbeing Through Relationships, Not Just Services – People want informal, community-based sources of wellbeing – a culture where neighbours and peers offer everyday support and where mental health is embedded in belonging.

“That’s what’s missing – people being able to lean on other people’s strengths and come together.”

“Families... just come in and say, ‘I didn’t know who else to ask.’”

Echoing research from Anda et al. (2016), this dream points to the vital but often invisible role of informal, culturally-rooted support circles. It’s a call to recognise and invest in healing relationships that already exist outside of formal structures.



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Dream Phase

2. Community-Led, Not Top-Down – People want to move away from traditional, professional-led service delivery toward community-owned initiatives. The dream is for a network of trusted local spaces where families, residents, and volunteers have real agency.

“Ultimately, success is when communities can lead and sustain change without us.”

“Parents within our centres... run their own groups... with families and the community taking the ownership.”

This aspiration involves rebalancing power, allowing residents to shape, lead, and sustain the very support structures they use.

3. A Culture of Joy, Connection, and Welcoming Spaces – Engagement, participants stressed, flourishes through fun and relationship-centred activities. The most effective invitations are not clinical, but joyful, inclusive, and based on genuine connection.

“Make it fun, follow people’s interests.”

“A welcoming space. Not overwhelming. A bit like a home.”

The vision includes safe, relaxed environments where people feel comfortable dropping in without fear or formality, “places to have a cuppa, to laugh, to be seen and valued.”

4. Integration and Collaboration Across Sectors – Stronger connections between schools, health services, and community groups emerged as a major aspiration. People dream of integrated systems that centre families and communities, flattening hierarchies and dissolving silos.

“There’s a box for everyone – health, education, housing – but no one speaks to each other.”

“In 2030, I’d love to see the headline: ‘Interagency partnership work finally absolutely bloody achieved.’”

The ideal is a “one-stop community ecosystem,” where professionals and residents alike feel part of a joined-up, compassionate system.

5. Trust, Continuity, and Long-Term Presence – Participants yearned for consistency, not flash-in-the-pan projects, but dependable relationships and trusted local figures who are always around.

“Success would be just being present. Turning up. Being around.”

“People lose trust when something crops up, then disappears because of funding.”

This reflects a vision of sustainable, relationship-based support that extends beyond the constraints of funding cycles.

Summary

Participants dream of a future defined by relational infrastructure, communities that are empowered, joyful, collaborative, and self-sustaining. Instead of systems that serve people, they imagine communities that support each other, with professionals stepping in only when needed, not as gatekeepers but as enablers.

The message is clear: People thrive when they feel connected, valued, and in control. The opportunity lies in nurturing what already works – trust, creativity, joy, and community leadership, and building a system that amplifies those human strengths.



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Design Phase – What Needs to Change?

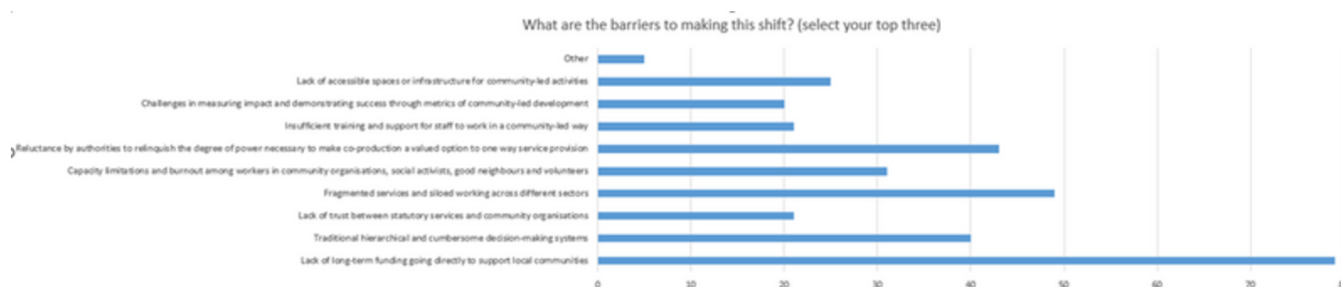
Planning for a System Rooted in Trust, Equity, and Relational Practice

The Design phase brought clear direction: if we want to realise the dream of a relational, community-led future, we must fundamentally rewire how power, funding, and partnerships operate. This is not just about doing things better, it's about doing different things based on values of trust, co-production, and shared learning.

Through the survey we identified a number of barriers that limit the vision coming to life. We asked “What are the barriers to making this shift? (select your top three)”

The top three responses were:

1. Lack of long-term funding going directly to support local communities
2. Fragmented services and siloed working across different sectors
3. Reluctance by authorities to relinquish the degree of power necessary to make co-production a valued option to one way service provision



However, we also asked “How do you think we can work together to overcome those barriers?” The themed responses are listed.

1. From Competition to Collaboration – Participants identified a core structural barrier: the competitive nature of funding and siloed working across sectors. The dominant systems reward short-term wins, reinforce fragmentation, and pit organisations against one another. There was a strong call to replace this with cooperative, value-aligned partnerships.

“Our systems are set up to compete, not to collaborate.”

“Partnership working... instead of competition across the sector would likely have a positive impact.”

“Work together before tenders go out.”

This shift requires not just goodwill but enabling infrastructure, shared tools, purposeful collaboration time, and systems for mutual accountability and learning.



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Design Phase

2. Shift Power: Community Leadership and Co-Production – Real change means transferring decision-making power to the community. Respondents and interviewees called for organisations to move from delivering for communities to working with them. This includes distributed leadership, grassroots activism, and professionals stepping back when appropriate.

“Empowering people to take leadership roles in their communities.”

“Take off your lanyard and ‘be with’ people as local residents together.”

“Unearthing the gifts and community activism that is already there if you look for it.”

Co-production isn’t a buzzword; it’s about changing how we listen, plan, and act—based on relationships, not roles.

3. Funding Reform for Long-Term, Community-Led Change. Short-term, top-down funding cycles continue to undermine the capacity for communities to lead. Participants expressed frustration at burdensome processes, risk-averse cultures, and funders’ disconnection from lived realities.

“Significant changes in commissioning... focus on community-led outcomes.”

“Funding opportunities that are short term... don’t support change.”

“Direct funding to local organisations and easier accessibility to this.”

The vision is for funding that prioritises trust, flexibility, and outcomes that matter to communities, not those defined by bureaucratic targets.

4. Value Time and Relational Work as Core Business. Time, not money was named the most precious resource. Yet staff are pulled into admin, heavy KPI-driven routines that leave little space for genuine relationships.

“If we could let go of the KPIs... we’d have all the time in the world.”

“We’re flat-out all the time. There’s no space to be curious... to be visible in the community.”

To design for relational practice, we must redefine performance, centring trust, presence, and flexibility over efficiency.

5. Build Trusting Cultures and Shared Governance. Relational work thrives in a culture of trust, psychological safety, and shared learning. Participants described the power of leaders being present, of everyday co-creation, and of governance agreements that handle conflict and align values.

“This work should be seen as core, not just ‘nice to have.’”

“It’s a breath of fresh air. You feel seen and valued.”

“We had an MOU... but it didn’t have anything around conflict resolution or accountability.”

Designing for change means intentionally creating cultures, agreements, and leadership practices that support transparency, values alignment, and respectful disagreement.



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Design Phase

Summary Vision

To enable the shift from traditional service delivery to empowered, community-led support, we must design systems that prioritise collaboration over competition, relationships over referrals, and trust over control. This includes:

- Investing in long-term funding models that flow directly to communities
- Flattening hierarchies and embedding co-production as standard practice
- Valuing the relational time and space needed to build trust and sustain engagement
- Creating practical, shared infrastructure to support learning and collaboration
- Embedding relational leadership and cultural fit into how partnerships are formed and maintained

Ultimately, the future isn't something to deliver to communities, it's something to build with them.



Credit: Families and artist, Rose Popay, create a vision for Children and Family Centres, funded by Together Gloucester.
Credit: Movement for Change with Together Gloucester

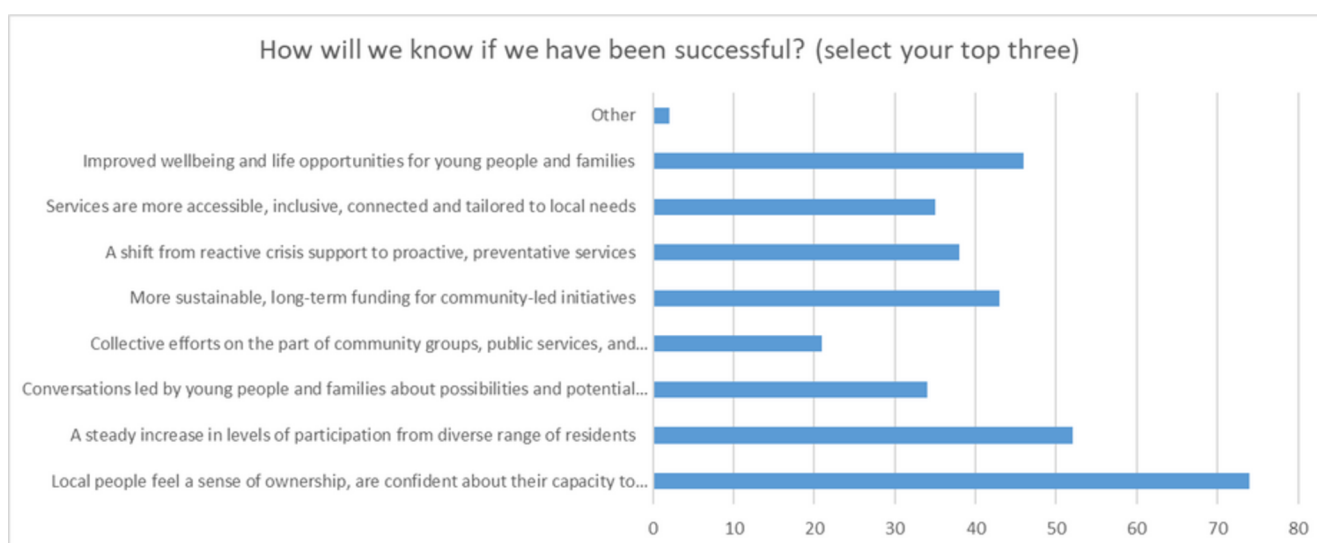


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Destiny Phase – How Will We Know We've Been Successful?

In envisioning a future shaped by community-led change, participants highlighted three key indicators of success:

1. Local people feel a sense of ownership, are confident about their capacity to change things for the better and there is a wide appreciation of the need for interdependence
2. A steady increase in levels of participation from diverse range of residents
3. Improved wellbeing and life opportunities for young people and families



These aspirations were further enriched by contributions from interviews and focus groups, which revealed three overarching themes for sustaining momentum:

1. Empowered, Connected, and Inclusive Communities. Success means communities are not only engaged but leading change – rooted in ownership, connection, and confidence. People want to feel a sense of belonging and influence, where roles like family support workers become redundant because the community holds and supports itself.

“Success will look like my role being redundant because the community functions like a supportive village.”

“People involved in decision making are the people who the decisions affect!”

“We all need to build relationships before we need them.”

Participants stressed the importance of weaving together local assets and relationships to reduce isolation and create shared ownership. This includes proactively involving underrepresented voices – young people, grassroots groups, town councils, and families in shaping solutions from the ground up.



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Destiny Phase

2. Shifting Systems Towards Relational, Local, and Sustainable Practice. There is a collective desire to move from transactional, professional-led models to community-held, relational ones. Participants called for a systemic shift: from “doing to” toward “doing with,” from short-term projects to sustained, place-based support.

“Let’s have the conversation before the tender goes out.”

“Sustainable, community-led intervention and prevention pathways... supporting people to engage with coproduction.”

“Let’s recreate the villages that everyone talks about when they talk about raising children.”

This means designing services around the lived experiences of those who use them, embracing qualitative, family-led measures of success, and embedding shared accountability.

3. A Culture of Ongoing Reflection, Learning, and Presence. Participants want to commit to being consistently present in communities, not just responding to a crisis. There is a strong emphasis on learning together, adapting practice, and valuing human connection over process.

“Consistency is everything. It’s the showing up again and again that matters.”

“We need to keep learning. This isn’t about best practice, it’s about better practice.”

“We’re not filling out a form, we’re just being with the person.”

Frontline staff especially highlighted the need for mentoring, peer support, and relational tools such as peaceful dialogue and nonviolent communication to navigate complexity and conflict. Leaders were seen as critical role models in shaping this culture across the whole sector.

In Summary

The destiny envisioned is not a fixed endpoint but a shared commitment to keep showing up, learning together, and staying rooted in relationships. Success will be felt when:

- Community members confidently lead change,
- Systems adapt to support them,
- And all stakeholders, residents, professionals, and leaders walk alongside each other in relational, inclusive, and sustainable ways.



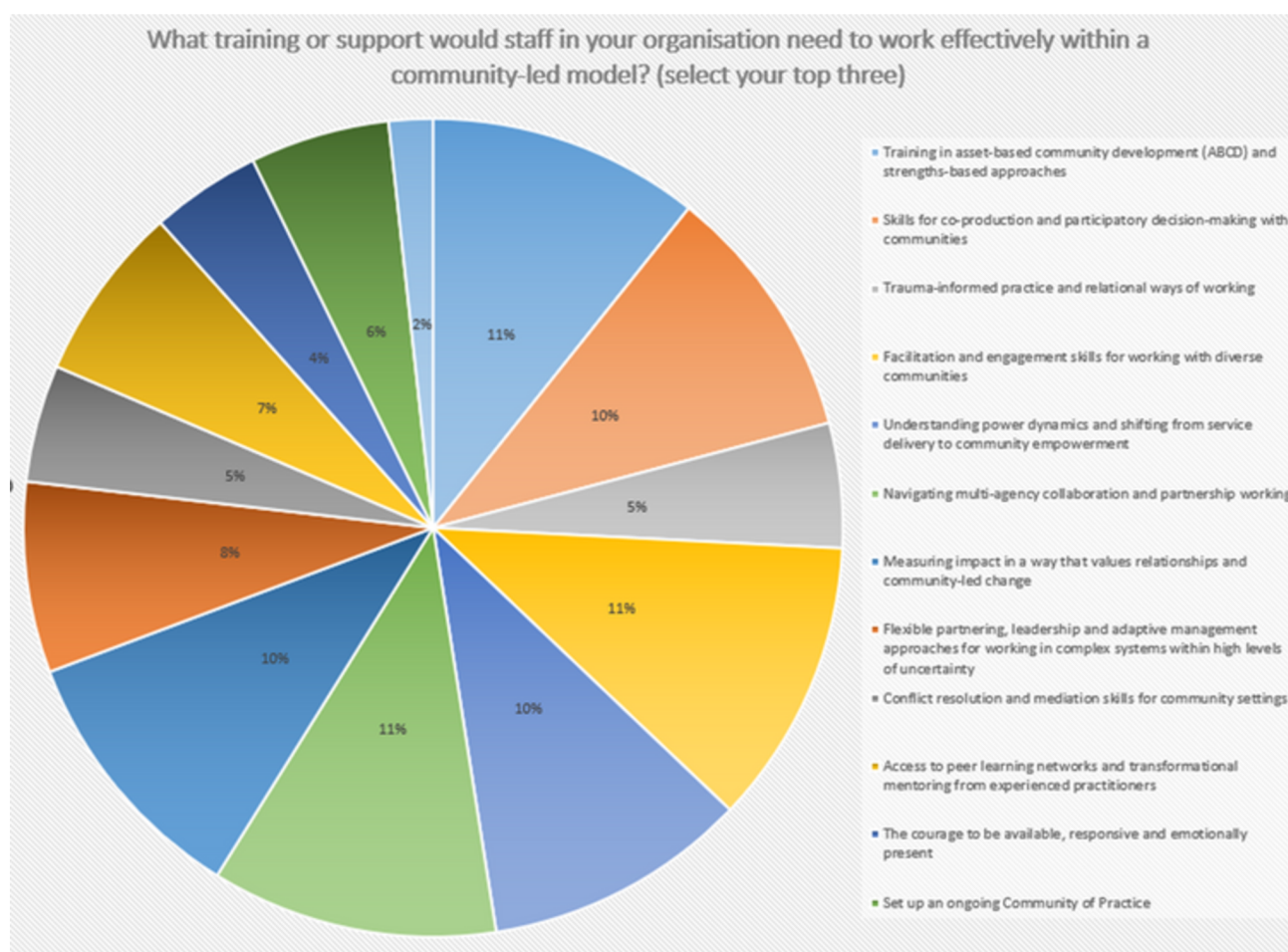
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Understanding Learning and Development needs.

In keeping with an appreciative approach, we invited participants to imagine what could strengthen their ability to flourish within a community-led model.

We asked:

“What training or support would staff in your organisation need to work effectively within a community-led model? (select your top three)”



The responses painted a picture of potential and possibility, with no single option dominating, indicating a broad appetite for growth across a range of areas. This balanced spread affirms the importance of a whole-system, inclusive learning programme that supports diverse roles, learning styles, and stages of development.



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Understanding Learning and Development needs.

Yet within this diversity, three themes rose to the surface as shared priorities across organisations:

1. Facilitation and engagement skills for working with diverse communities. This was the most frequently selected need, reflecting a collective aspiration to deepen confidence in engagement skills. It suggests that teams are ready to strengthen their capacity to hold space, listen actively, and foster trust across lines of difference.

2. Navigating multi-agency collaboration and partnership working. Respondents identified the importance of skills to work across boundaries – organisational, professional, and cultural. This reflects a growing recognition that sustained impact is most likely when we move from siloed action to collective, coordinated efforts rooted in shared purpose.

3. Training in asset-based community development (ABCD) and strengths-based approaches. The emphasis here signals a desire to shift paradigms—from doing to communities to doing with and by. Respondents are calling for tools and frameworks that help surface community assets, build on what's strong, and support meaningful participation.

These insights are not merely about skills acquisition, they reflect a mindset shift already underway. Staff are envisioning a future where they are better equipped to support self-determination, build equitable partnerships, and amplify the strengths already present in communities. The training and support needs identified here offer a blueprint for investing in that future.





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Areas to think about...

Clarifying the Focus of Relational Practice

While there is strong enthusiasm for relational approaches, for some this is primarily interpreted as building relationships between people and their organisation or services. This can risk overshadowing the deeper aim: fostering meaningful relationships between people within the community. The programme should explore how both dimensions are important and interdependent.

Aligning Around a Shared Vision

Although shared values are evident across the partnership, a clear and unified long-term vision is not yet fully established. It may be helpful to create space for a collective conversation that grounds the vision in personal relevance – for example, asking “what kind of community do I want my children/grandchildren to grow up in?”

Developing a Common Language

There is a shared commitment to relational and strengths-based approaches, but inconsistent language can create barriers. This often stems from professional backgrounds – for example, children’s services and community development practitioners may describe similar concepts using different terminology. A shared language will help build mutual understanding and coherence.

Navigating Tensions Between Services

Some friction exists between family support services and schools, which may impact collaboration. While this may sit slightly outside the direct scope of the learning programme, it’s important to acknowledge and consider how these relationships might be supported or signposted within the wider context.

Embedding Relational Approaches to Conflict

Embracing a relational model also requires attention to how we manage tensions and conflicts – not only between individuals in communities but also between organisations. The learning programme could offer frameworks or reflective space for constructive conflict resolution.

Reflecting on Statutory Roles Through a Relational Lens

Statutory duties are sometimes viewed as inherently transactional. However, there is scope for practitioners to reflect on **how** they deliver these services, not just **what** they do. This shift in mindset can help bring a relational ethic even to work that is governed by formal responsibilities.

