

Community grants: our impact

Year end report 2020/21



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Introduction

Our Thriving Communities Strategy explains how everything we do is designed to improve the wellbeing and quality of life of our residents individually, and to contribute to developing thriving and resilient communities collaboratively.

This report shows some of the impact of our 2020/21 Communities grants programme on those ambitions.

It was a year which saw us rapidly adapt our services and budgets to support individual households and work alongside incredible grass roots organisations to deliver for our communities during an unprecedented time.

As a housing association, we have a strong **social purpose**. We want to build genuinely affordable homes and provide effective services. So we're committed to measuring our impact - including against non-financial performance indicators (such as being accountable to customers and managing our carbon footprint).

continued...



Introduction

These ethical, sustainable and corporate governance issues are often known as ESG.

Our Communities grants contribute to a wider programme of ESG activity, which includes delivering extra '**social value**' through our supply chain – encouraging our contractors to contribute to the wider community too by providing apprenticeships and training; volunteering their time; or offering their goods and services.

The impact of all this work will also be covered more in our first ever ESG report, published later in 2021.

Whether you're a Sovereign resident, part of a community group, or an organisation looking for new partners, I hope you enjoy finding out more our work and the impact that our community grant funding streams have had in 2020/21.

Matt Buckham

Communities Director



Our teams and approach

Community Action

- Building strength and resilience in our communities is fundamental to making our homes great places to live. We adopt an asset-based community development approach. That means working alongside the community to empower them achieve their goals. Our role is to help identify and mobilise existing, but often unrecognised, assets to drive the community's development.

Money and Digital

- Money Matters and Digital Inclusion are essential for people's wellbeing and maximising their life opportunities. We're committed to providing all our customers with the digital skills and access to digital equipment to make the most of the online world. We also work with specialist partners to tackle financial insecurity, focusing on money and debt advice, fuel poverty and budgeting.

Employment and Training

- Working with a range of partners, we create, fund and deliver projects to help residents access employment, skills and training opportunities. From looking for work to wanting a better job, a change of career or a business start-up, we've helped 1,000s achieve a brighter future.



So, what was our impact in 2020/21?

Across our whole programme, we...

- invested £4.72 million into communities
- engaged with over 9,000 people
- supported 729 local groups and organisations
- secured over £2 million in external funding
- set up employment & training and money & digital programmes
- delivered £24 million social value

What some of our residents and partners said...

'I'd wholeheartedly recommend talking to Sovereign's employment and training team – my business wouldn't be where it is today without that helping hand.'

Nicola, Sovereign resident and business owner

'This helped me out through tough times. I really appreciate the help.'

Zoe, Sovereign resident, on the Sovereign Support Fund

'Sovereign's process is easy and good. You have the community team to speak to and... you can go to them if you need anything. They always take a keen interest in what we're doing. They steer me into funding much more than anyone else.'

West Berkshire charity

Community action

We want to support the development of successful and sustainable communities in the areas where we operate.

Every community is unique, so all our work is shaped by the aspirations of local people.

We work alongside a range of like-minded organisations to co-create and deliver sustainable solutions that are led by our customers and local community organisations – building on their existing strengths and potential.

To make the most of the money we invest, we do this through a blended delivery of direct funding, commissioned services and partnerships.

The following pages share some highlights of this work and outline our main grants programmes.



Community action - highlights

- Supported **729** community groups
- **9,460** people engaged with our Community Development Officers or projects they supported
- Around **137,494** people benefited from funding through our Communities grant programmes
- Secured **£1,335,272** in match funding via our Crowdfunder and The Good Exchange grants programmes
- **5,368** over-55s took part in, or benefited from, one of 20 Live Well projects

Community action – our main grant programmes

Crowdfunder

Our Crowdfunder partnership enables Sovereign communities to develop their own projects to match fund from the crowd and create great places and spaces. This approach empowers people to actively show their passion for projects that really mean something to them.

We also responded to Covid-19 with a 'Pay It Forward' campaign on Crowdfunder. This enabled 17 local businesses, community projects, social enterprises, creatives and self-employed people to pitch for a share of our £50,000 funding pot – which then leveraged £190,000 from other donors.

The Good Exchange

The Good Exchange brings together a community of funders, fund raisers, donors and the public in support of community and charitable projects. The unique web platform automatically matches projects to multiple sources of funding via a single application.

We offered up to £10,000 each to projects supporting our residents in their communities. In total we awarded 44 grants worth over £120,000 – attracting £157,000 of match funding to the same projects.

Community action – our main grant programmes

Your Community Your Choice

This resident-led funding project uses a participatory budgeting model, empowering customers and communities to vote on a budget of £80,000. Working in partnership with VocalEyes, an online platform enabled residents to submit and then vote for ideas to improve outdoor spaces.

Our pilot in 2020/21 covered the two areas of Bristol and Abingdon. Over 1,100 people took part and the six projects with the most votes in each area were taken forward by residents, working together to improve their communities. This year we're building on the same approach to launch an even bigger and better programme.

Community Development Officer grants

Our Community Development Officers play a vital role, working alongside grass roots organisations in their geographical area. As well as providing grants and project funding, they're there to give advice and information – facilitating community action, sharing involvement and training opportunities, suggesting new partnerships and signposting other sources of funding.



Case study: rooted in the community

Thanks to match funding via our Crowdfunder partnership, Grounded Community in Boscombe received £10,000.

The charity distributes supermarket surplus alongside freshly grown fruit and vegetables (from its own garden and a network of home growers) to local families who may need it.

Operating out of its 'Secret Garden', it also offers educational sessions for those wanting to take up gardening: teaching local people how to grow their own healthy, nutritious food.

continued...



Rooted in the community (contin.)

The group explain: 'Whether it's growing greens on a windowsill, creating and cultivating a vegetable patch or learning how to install an irrigation system, we're here to help.'

'We aim to equip people with the knowledge they need to then grow at home, with the ultimate ambition of helping our community to become self-sufficient.'

The charity also runs a wide range of environmental workshops and events throughout the year, such as outdoor play sessions, hedgehog care and bee-keeping.

Money and digital

Our Money and Digital team helped deliver 1,700 positive outcomes for customers during the year.

Their involvement ranged from giving one to one support to help people get online during lockdown, to offering a range of courses via 'Learn My Way' – our online learning portal.

We referred customers to independent debt advice and offered training in how to budget better. We provided emergency fuel vouchers to give families practical help when it mattered most.

And, with mental health and wellbeing more important than ever during the pandemic, our partnership with Together All was there for those who needed this sort of support too.



Money and digital - highlights

- **1,238** customers engaged through 'Money Matters' services, with **£31,000** debt repaid or written off
- **504** customers supported by our digital inclusion services
- **383** given equipment to get online
- **£12,500** to Greenham Trust's Laptops for Lockdown Learning fund and **£12,500** to support families in other areas with access to tech for home-schooling
- Helped tackle fuel poverty with **£30,000** worth of emergency fuel vouchers to **644** households



Case study: Denise goes digital

We referred Denise (56) from Swindon into our 'We Are Digital' training offer as she had no digital knowledge or experience - making it hard for her to find and apply for jobs.

We Are Digital provided a tablet and a MiFi device with data (which uses a mobile phone network connection) so that she could access the internet.

They then gave Denise bespoke one to one training to enable her to get basic online skills and empower her to continue her digital learning and expand her knowledge.

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Case study: Denise goes digital (contin.)

With training, she's learnt how to send emails and include an attachment, letting her apply for jobs which require her to attach a CV. She's also able to use online job search sites, which has widened her job search significantly.

Denise can also be in contact with friends and family and do online shopping, a big help during lockdown.

Now she's gained confidence in using the basics and is exploring what else her tablet has to offer. She's also increasing her online skills with the help of family and her Employment and Training Officer.

Employment and training

During the year we re-framed our service and moved to become fully digital.

The bonus was being able to reach so many more customers right across all our areas – helping them to access the training, placements and jobs that are right for them.

Our funding grants can support someone with vocational qualifications, skills training, to start a new job or work placement (by covering costs including uniform, travel, childcare or Personal Protective Equipment) or to help them start a new business or become self-employed.



Employment and training - highlights

- **1,944** residents received employment and training advice and guidance
- **327** people gained work or better paid work through our services and programmes
- **1,182** customers achieved training outcomes – from funding for vocational qualifications to advice on interview techniques
- Issued **£78,775** to **1,599** families in crisis via our Sovereign Support Fund



Case study: Jodi's dream job

'Thank you so much for all your help and giving me fantastic opportunities to achieve my dream job.'

So says Jodi, who's keen to spread the word about the support our Employment and Training team can offer if someone's struggling to find a job, looking for better paid work or to set up a business.

Originally a friend suggested Jodi get in touch with us. Her goal was to be self-employed, giving her the flexibility she needed as a lone parent.

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Case study: Jodi's dream job (contin.)

Jodi had coaching support and help to access a laptop. Then a specialist Business Advisor worked with her and her business partner on their business plan and applying for a start-up grant.

As her confidence grew, Jodi set up on her own and diversified her mindfulness business, with more help from our team and financial support for her marketing plan.

Now she's achieving her dream of running her own business, qualified as a specialist counsellor and has set up her own [website](#).



Conclusion: doing even more...

Last year a major challenge was adapting how we work to make sure our grant funding was available quickly to mutual aid groups across our areas.

Now we're doing even more. Building on last year's activities, we aim to generate over £30 million of social value for customers and communities – including leveraging more value through our supplier contracts.

We'll continue and expand our grants and seek more external funding so that we can do even more to deliver our Thriving Communities Strategy: directly and through our partners.

Community action: doing even more in 2021/22

- In 2021/22 we're developing new grants and extending our Your Community Your Choice funding (suggested and voted for by local people) to the Isle of Wight and Devon, as well as Bristol and Abingdon.
- Our second year partnering with Crowdfunder will see us invest £100,000 to support small local businesses and community projects around health and wellbeing; education; social inclusion; co-creation and building partnerships; sustainable communities; community cohesion; or climate change. We're also extending our partnership with The Good Exchange, committing £100,000 of funding via this online platform towards community projects and charitable initiatives.
- We're creating a 'Live Well' digital offer – including running a virtual Thrive Festival for over-55s in October 2021 that we'll share more about on our web, social media and other channels.
- Linking to our Live Well offer, we will be launching micro grants for individuals and un-constituted groups through our partner Charis. Customers will be able to apply directly for a grant that can improve their own wellbeing or the wellbeing of the community.

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Community action: doing even more in 2021/22

- We're improving our offer to young people and running summer activity programmes; setting up and supporting environmental projects and focusing on some of the neighbourhoods where we're building new homes – while we keep working with existing community groups in many other areas.
- Working with our Property team, we jointly funded our Assisted Gardening Programme to support customers to manage their gardens if, for whatever reason, this isn't something they can do themselves. Using this experience, we're looking for external funding to launch a Love your Garden campaign – watch this space.
- This year we've launched a 'Living Together' initiative with our Housing colleagues. This fund offers options to homes and neighbourhoods, improving communities by helping them to live together better – for example, through simple solutions such as privacy screening.
- We'll also be building on the work of our Youth Panel to develop a programme of work for the year that young people want to influence. And we'll be working with our internal teams and external partner (Community Youth Network), to develop a Youth Strategy for Sovereign.

Money and digital: doing even more in 2021/22

- This year we have an even more effective approach to providing debt advice, working more closely with our Income team to provide a better offer for our customers.
- We've also developed an improved 'digital grants' programme, helping people with the skills or equipment to get online.
- A new £10,000 partnership with Pocket Power will help residents save money on a range of utility bills. The service addresses three barriers to switching provider that people face: time, tech and trust – they're booked in for a phone call where they can switch and apply for discounts.
- And we're introducing a new grant programme to help customers buy essential white goods such as a fridge, cooker or washing machine. Other services around affordable furniture and affordable finance will also be launched later this year.



Employment and training: doing even more in 2021/22

- We're involved in an exciting Skills4Work project with Southern Housing Group to support 100 participants on the Isle of Wight into work. This ambitious project is half funded with £50,000 from the European Social Fund with the rest coming from our two associations.
- We're also part of the Kickstart Housing Partnership, led by Clarion Futures. This will see us host 40 Kickstart placements across our business between May and December 2021 - providing a clear pathway into work - and the first steps of their career - for young people who are unemployed and receiving Universal Credit.
- More widely, our focus this year is on helping those facing poverty but already in work: to improve their skills, retrain or secure better paid work.
- We're also offering specialist support for those looking to become tenants for the first time; the young people living in our Foyer schemes; and customers at risk of redundancy as the country comes to term with the long-term effects of Covid-19 on the economy.

Get in touch

If you'd like support or advice from one of our team, please get in touch. Ring us on 0300 5000 926 or email us:

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Or visit our website: www.my.sovereign.org.uk

Access our online grants programme

Crowdfunder

<https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/funds/sovereign-communities>

The Good Exchange

<https://app.thegoodexchange.com/funders/10874/sovereign-housing-association>

Your Community Your Choice

<https://www.sovereign.org.uk/your-community-your-choice>

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