



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

UK Shared Prosperity Fund Evaluation: Impact and Lessons for Places

Evidence from 33 place-level evaluations

August 2026



Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government



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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this report

This report provides a synthesis of impact and economic evaluation findings from 33 UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) place-level case study evaluations¹. The report identifies common impacts achieved, mechanisms for change and successes in implementing and delivering UKSPF interventions. While in each place the Lead Local Authority (LLA) has taken a different, localised approach, there are important commonalities to identify and to learn lessons from, including between the different intervention priorities: Communities and Place, Supporting Local Business and People and Skills. In addition, there is a companion synthesis report focused on findings of the process evaluation, providing additional insights and learning, which is available [here](#). The full set of place-level case study summaries are available [here](#).

This report will be of interest to policymakers in government, and combined and local authorities who are seeking to use learning from UKSPF to design future local growth and communities' interventions. It provides insights to inform the overall structure and policy direction of new funds, assesses whether Communities and Place, Supporting Local Business and People and Skills interventions have achieved their intended impacts, and identifies which mechanisms have been most effective in delivering those impacts.

1.2 UKSPF programme overview

The UKSPF was launched by the UK Government in April 2022. It provided £2.6 billion of funding for local investment by March 2025, with an additional £900 million available for 2025-26. Local decision-makers worked with their local communities and partners to deliver interventions under the three investment priorities. Places were empowered to identify and build on their own strengths and address needs at a local level, focused on enhancing community pride and increasing life chances.

1.3 UKSPF place-level evaluation

Place-level evaluation activity for UKSPF involved conducting case study evaluations in specific places across the UK. These case studies generated robust evidence on how local interventions were delivered, the impacts they achieved and the value for money of local programmes. The detailed methodology underpinning the case study evaluation is available [here](#). This provided the evidence base for this synthesis report.

Conducting place-level evaluation of UKSPF design, implementation and activities allowed a holistic approach to understanding how combinations of interventions worked together, aligned with local strategies and delivered alongside other local growth funds.

¹ The place-level evaluation for Northern Ireland did not include an impact or economic evaluation, focussing solely on process findings. Therefore, no evidence from the Northern Ireland place-level evaluation is included in this report.

This approach reflects the highly local way in which places selected their UKSPF interventions. Places could focus their investment on a small number of outcomes, for example Maidstone only funded Communities and Place interventions. The place-level evaluation allowed outcomes of greatest relevance to each place to be assessed. However, this means this evaluation should not be considered representative of delivery across the UKSPF programme.

1.4 Synthesis approach and methodology

This synthesis report presents the analytical findings of the impact and economic evaluations of 33 place-level case studies. The analysis focusses on a common set of 28 contribution hypotheses from across the impact evaluations, and the findings from a synthesis of value for money evidence collected using the common economic evaluation framework.

The impact and economic evaluation findings in the place-level final reports are based on a combination of evidence and analytical approaches, including monitoring and administrative data, beneficiary and stakeholder interviews and surveys, and secondary data sources. The evaluation findings were subject to a thematic analysis using the common contribution hypotheses and key economic evaluation questions set out in their respective frameworks. The 33 place-level final reports were further analysed using 'Ipsos Facto' generative artificial intelligence tool and manually reviewed against the key hypotheses and questions for fidelity.

Throughout the report, interventions are defined as the type of activity undertaken (e.g. business support advisory services) whilst mechanisms are the underlying ways in which the intervention intends to effect change.

In addition to the thematic analysis for the impact evaluation, Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) was applied to 14 of the 28 common hypotheses (see Annex 2 for details on the selection method). This was used to identify the place-level and delivery model factors which were most likely to contribute to the achievement of impact. Five of the 14 QCA models demonstrated clear pathways to outcomes and are presented in this report:

- The impact of community engagement activities on participation in community life;
- The impact of business support programmes on establishing new businesses;
- The impact of business support on productivity;
- The impact of employability and skills-based learning programmes on economic activity;
- The impact of employability support on job search activity.

For the nine QCA models which did not produce usable results, challenges in quality and accuracy of the management information, together with low variability in Contribution Assessments reduced the usefulness of the findings.

The QCA used a mix of crisp and fuzzy datasets for the conditions, and fuzzy sets for all outcomes of interest. The thresholds for fuzzy sets were established by measuring monitoring information on relevant outcome achievement against relevant secondary data for the areas of interest. For example, where places tested hypothesis relating to business births, the number of new businesses started as a result of UKSPF support (as reported in monitoring information) was compared to the number of business births in the area in the period (2022 to 2025). This was used

to establish thresholds for outcome realisation. The higher the proportion, the higher the outcome value assigned for the QCA.

Interpretation of Qualitative Comparative Analysis

Consistency: Consistency indicates the proportion of causal configurations that lead to the same outcome. If a consistency score is 1, all cases with the same configuration – or combination – of conditions have the same outcome. The cut-off score for consistency for fuzzy sets is 0.8 (whereby at least 80% of cases within a solution must have the same configuration of conditions and the same outcome).

Coverage: Coverage indicates the proportion of an outcome that is explained by a configuration. The closer to 1, the higher the coverage.

1.5 Report structure

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the contribution analysis (CA) and qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) for the Communities and Place theme. Section 3 applies the same analytical approach to the Supporting Local Business theme, followed by Section 4, which covers People and Skills. Section 5 brings together findings from across all 33 places to provide a synthesis of the value for money assessment. Finally, Section 6 draws out the key cross-cutting and thematic lessons and implications for policymakers.

2. Impact evaluation – Communities and Place

2.1 Communities and Place overview

This section examines how UKSPF interventions under the Communities and Place investment priority contributed to local area regeneration and community pride outcomes. It focuses on relevant standard outcomes from case study places and examines what mechanisms enabled the outcomes, how they differed across places, and what impact was observed in local places as a result of UKSPF. This chapter covers the outcomes and hypotheses in Table 2.1.

Compared to the other investment priorities, fewer of the evaluated Community and Place outcomes showed strong contribution from UKSPF interventions. This was partly due to the challenge isolating the contribution of UKSPF where multiple interventions to improve public spaces and community pride were ongoing. Interventions improving community engagement and capacity of the VCSE sector were more often assessed as supported and therefore a key success of UKSPF delivery.

Table 2.1. Contribution hypothesis assessment for Community and Place outcomes

Contribution hypothesis	Number of places where hypothesis tested	Proportion of places where hypotheses rated "supported" (%)²
Perceptions of place and community pride		
Refurbishing facilities and improving infrastructure leads to better public perception of specific local areas/facilities	13	62%
Refurbishing facilities and improving infrastructure leads to increased community pride	4	50%
Town centre improvements lead to improved perception of the town centre	7	29%
Improvements to public places lead to improved perception of the local area	12	58%
Improvements to public places lead to increased community pride	4	75%
Increased footfall and usage		
UKSPF funding creates new facilities that meet local demand, resulting in increased usage.	3	100%
UKSPF funding improves facilities that meet local demand, resulting in increased usage.	11	64%

Arts/cultural/heritage events attract more people to key locations/town centres	7	86%
Increased community engagement		
Capacity building support creates more volunteering opportunities	10	90%
Capacity building support leads to increased volunteering	6	83%
Community engagement activities lead to participation in community life	9	89%
Increased community capacity		
Support for voluntary/community organisations increases their capacity and reach, leading to more community-led activity.	12	100%
Anti-crime and anti-social behaviour measures		
Upgrading anti-crime/anti-ASB infrastructure reduces crime and ASB in the local area	7	43%
Upgrading anti-crime/anti-ASB infrastructure and reduction in crime and ASB reduce fear of crime/ASB among residents	4	50%
Overall		71%

2.2 Improved perception of place and pride in place

H10.1 Refurbishing facilities and improving infrastructure leads to better public perception of specific local areas/facilities

The hypothesis assessed whether refurbishing facilities and improving infrastructure led to better public perception of specific local areas and facilities. The expectation was that visible and functional changes to public realm, community buildings and commercial frontages, combined with improved accessibility, would make places more attractive, usable and cared for. In turn, these improvements were expected to increase satisfaction and perceptions of local amenities and place. The hypothesis was examined in 13 of the 33 place-level evaluations; for eight places the contribution claim was supported, and undetermined in the rest.

2.2.1 Mechanisms supporting improvements in perceptions of place

Public realm refurbishment signalled care for place, improvements such as facade upgrades, interior renovations, refreshed surfaces, planting and repairs, aimed to address visible signs of decline. Improvements to locations with commercial properties aimed to fill vacant units and encourage footfall.

Accessibility improvements broadened the population of people who felt able to use spaces or facilities. Step-free access, wider doors, accessible toilets, improved seating and reconfigurable interiors reduced practical barriers to participation and enabled a wider range of activities.

Park and outdoor improvements including green and blue space enhancements improved aesthetics and contributed to increases in everyday use. Nature-based projects were often combined with community engagement (e.g., tree planting, forest schools, nature walks) to “activate” use of the refreshed space.

Safety measures such as new lighting, CCTV and seating design that discouraged loitering – these aimed to create a sense of safety in place and therefore improve public perceptions.

2.2.2 Differences in mechanisms across places

Approach and emphasis varied by local context, shaping the route by which perceptions improved. Most places utilised a combination of mechanisms to refurbish or improve the local area with the aim of improving perceptions of place.

East Riding of Yorkshire combined venue refurbishment with community-led environmental improvements. Residents reported that upgraded interiors, facade improvements and better equipment made facilities more attractive and more comfortable to use (e.g. multi-functional hub with kitchen and training facilities).

Gateshead’s programme focussed on the greening of public space and a set of library refurbishments. Physical works and programmed activities along the new green route were reported to have built a sense of place and attachment through nature, culture and heritage, with interview evidence reporting positive perceptions of the space. Refurbished libraries were perceived as warm, welcoming community spaces and drew positive user feedback at reopening.

The main mechanism for improving perceptions in Watford came from the redesigning of a prominent town-centre green space to address anti-social behaviour. Police and community stakeholders observed reduced anti-social behaviour in the space, more diverse users and emerging plans for new events and performances. An independent national quality award further validated these improvements.

2.2.3 Impacts on perception

Most place evaluations found robust evidence of the impact of UKSPF interventions on perception, although five places struggled to attribute evidence solely to the UKSPF.

In East Riding of Yorkshire, 91% (n=89) of surveyed users felt the refurbishment of facilities had improved their perception of them. Many respondents indicated they would have used it less, or not at all, without the works.

In Gateshead, interim evaluation findings reported positive outcomes for a strategic green corridor and very positive user feedback for refurbished libraries. Area-wide pride in place increased from 49% in 2023/4 to 54% in 2024/5 (n= 316 2023/4, n=517 2024/5).

Newcastle-under-Lyme reported 3,617 people with improved perceptions of local facilities and amenities with residents and stakeholders attributing better experiences to park and canal-side improvements alongside enhanced safety measures.

H10.2 Refurbishing facilities and improving infrastructure leads to increased community pride

The hypothesis assessed whether refurbishing facilities and improving local infrastructure led to increased community pride. The expectation was that visible, tangible upgrades to community venues, public realm, and green and blue spaces would signal care and investment, stimulate use, strengthen a sense of ownership and belonging, and, as a result, lift community pride in the places where people live. The contribution claim was examined in 4 out of 33 places, with two finding evidence confirming the hypothesis. The definition of community pride here is broader than the definition in Hypothesis 10.1 which examined pride around specific community places or facilities.

2.2.4 Mechanisms supporting improvements in community pride

The evidence points to a set of reinforcing mechanisms through which capital works and related activity supported increases in pride. Many of these mechanisms were described as contributing to improvements in perception and also community pride. However, there were some additional mechanisms identified as contributing primarily to community pride, which are described below.

Community involvement in design and delivery enabled local people to shape improvements, for example through co-design, volunteering, heritage activities and cultural programming. This aimed to improve the sense of ‘guardianship’ of spaces by local communities.

Heritage projects and place identity projects provided meaningful focal points for community pride. Investments that highlighted local history and cultural assets helped residents connect to the places they live in, aiming to reinforce a sense of shared identity.

2.2.5 Differences in mechanisms across places

As with the mechanisms delivering changes in perception of place, the mechanisms used were tailored to local needs, aligning with specific local priorities.

Highly visible venue refurbishments, accessibility upgrades and heritage-linked activity were combined with community engagement and practical enhancements that expanded the use of facilities. For example, in East Riding of Yorkshire, the restoration of a long-neglected pond of symbolic importance prompted a strong community effort and a widely shared sense of ownership. Across the East Riding of Yorkshire heritage activity generated 2,000 face-to-face engagements and strengthened cultural attachment between people and their local areas. The combination of activities led to expressions of pride in specific places.

In Glasgow City Region the strongest qualitative evidence of improvements in community pride came from sites where residents helped shape design and where upgrades created attractive, multi-use spaces perceived as safe and well maintained. This led to strong resident ownership of spaces, as reported through interviews.

2.2.6 Impacts on community pride

Qualitative research identified that improvements to infrastructure were associated with more positive feelings about facilities and, in several cases, with wider indicators of pride.

In East Riding, 70% (n=1,506) of respondents reported feeling proud to live in their area. Heritage and public-realm projects prompted engagement with more than 9,000 people and reinforced cultural attachment and community involvement.

In North Wales, a survey of grant recipients found 17 out of 23 organisations reported strengthened community pride and belonging as a key difference made by the grants, and stakeholder interviews linked pride to increased use, ownership and co-production.

H13.1 Town centre improvements lead to improved perception of the town centre

The hypothesis assessed whether targeted improvements to town centres would make centres feel more attractive, welcoming and cared for. Examples include visible physical upgrades, greening and shopfront works. In turn, these changes were expected to translate into improved public perceptions of town centres. This was tested across 7 of 33 places, with two finding evidence to support the hypothesis, while the evidence was insufficient to fully support the hypothesis in the remainder of places.

2.2.7 Mechanisms supporting improvements in perceptions of the town centre

The evidence points to a set of recurring mechanisms that worked together to change how people perceived town centres. These mechanism were similar to those that improved overall perceptions of the local place.

Refurbishment signalled care for place, as with hypothesis 10.1 and 10.2, visible physical improvements signalled that places were cared for and improving, contributing to positive perceptions.

Market infrastructure and seasonal events, including additional stalls and chalets, shared seating and decorative features altered how markets felt and were used.

Greening and improving street scene, by planting of trees and plants and selective de-paving introduced visible pockets of nature into previously hardscaped areas, softening the street scene and improving the look and feel of high-footfall streets.

Dedicated creative spaces along with cultural programming and affordable creative spaces shifted the narrative about the purpose of high streets. Cultural festivals reframed centres as places of local celebration, rather than solely for retail. Dedicated creative spaces offering affordable studios and exhibition opportunities added a visible, ongoing cultural presence, aiming to improve the perception of the high street.

2.2.8 Differences in mechanisms across places

The balance between physical improvement and activities varied by place, and this affected how quickly, and how strongly, perceived change emerged.

In Maidstone, the strongest signals of improved perception of the town centre were linked to greening and cultural activities in the heart of the town. De-paving and small-scale planting schemes created new greenery in the public realm and were accompanied by positive resident testimonials. Residents described the town as attractive, and data showed that activities were

drawing in visitors from outside Maidstone, with 31% of attendees at LitFest (which attracted more than 7,000 attendees across 80 public events) coming from outside the local area.

In North East Derbyshire, landscaping, planting and repaving, combined with shop front improvements, led to residents stating that the local area has become more attractive. Shopfront façade improvements and activities to improve the appearance of towns in South West Wales and Torridge were also reported to influence people's perceptions of towns, although it was still too early to evidence this fully.

2.2.9 Impacts on perception of town centre

In Maidstone, 62% of surveyed residents (n = 1,681) described the town as attractive, and greening interventions drew positive public reaction. The town was able to draw in visitors from outside Maidstone through cultural events and offers.

In North East Derbyshire, residents reported that changes had made the centre better and that their area had become more attractive over the past year compared with the rest of the district. Additionally, business feedback stated that shop front works improved the street scene and local pride.

In Torridge, qualitative research with residents and businesses near the central square reported a perceived improvement and increased opportunity for family-friendly activity.

H13.2 Improvements to public places lead to improved perception of the local area

The hypothesis assessed whether improvements to public places lead to improved perceptions of the local area. This assumed that mechanisms such as visible upgrades to parks and routes, refreshed streetscapes, and new or enhanced community assets would make local environments feel more attractive, usable and cared for. In turn, these changes were expected to lift how residents and visitors perceive those places in daily use and in survey measures. The contribution claim was examined in 12 of 33 places, with seven finding evidence to confirm the hypothesis.

2.2.10 Mechanisms supporting improvements in perceptions of the local area

The mechanisms used to support changes in perception are similar to those highlighted in the previous hypotheses, namely infrastructure and capital works signifying care for an area, improvements in accessibility, and community involvement in design and delivery all strengthen outcomes. In addition to these, two further mechanisms supported the achievement of outcomes.

Creation of communal spaces provided focal points for connection and everyday use. In estates without traditional hubs, community gardens created tangible spaces for meeting and activity.

Cultural programming and the provision of cultural events and volunteering opportunities capitalised on infrastructure and physical space upgrades to provide new community experiences. Cultural activities often drew large audiences across different places.

2.2.11 Differences in mechanisms across places

As with the other hypotheses, the mechanisms selected reflected local conditions and needs and varied by place. The effectiveness of mechanisms was influenced by differences in the scale and

timing of projects. Most places reported using combinations of mechanisms to deliver improvements in perception. These included investments in parks and outdoor spaces to increase usage, improve accessibility, greening and improved street scenes, supporting communal hubs, community involvement in the design and delivery of activities, and cultural events being used in combination with physical improvements.

In some places, such as North and South East Wales and the Highlands, the scale of the intervention was reported to be important, with larger investments generating more impact.

2.2.12 Impacts on perceptions of local area

In Chesterfield, a local survey recorded 45% increase in user satisfaction at improved parks; three sites secured external quality recognition; monitoring recorded sizeable shares of consulted users reporting improved perceptions at green spaces and sports facilities (36%, n=179); and area-wide satisfaction increased during the period (up 8%) as captured in the Community Life Survey.

In the City of Edinburgh, four new community gardens on council estates were linked to higher reported pride among garden users (42%), compared with garden users elsewhere (26%). Local interviews highlighted the perceived value of improved accessibility at a high-use location.

In Mid Wales, residents near a multi-use public nature site (42%) reported net positive shifts in perceptions of place, particularly satisfaction, and users highlighted stronger connections to nature. Improvements at the smaller site yielded more limited change within the timeframe (17%).

H13.3 Improvements to public places lead to increased community pride

The hypothesis assessed whether improvements to public places led to increased community pride. The anticipated mechanism for change was that visible, tangible upgrades to public assets, coupled with cultural events and opportunities for local people to participate would strengthen residents' connection to place and foster pride in their communities.

The contribution claim was examined in 4 of 33 places and was supported in three.

2.2.13 Mechanisms supporting improvement in community pride

The evidence describes a consistent set of mechanisms through which the funded activity translated into stronger pride, which are similar to those described above to promote improved perceptions and community pride. These include greening and improving street scenes, community involvement in the design and delivery of improvements, cultural events to reframe towns as places to visit and celebrate, improved accessibility and improvements demonstrating care for places.

2.2.14 Differences in mechanisms across places

The balance between physical improvement, cultural programming/events and participation varied by place, shaping both the pathway to increased pride and the strength of effects observed. In summary, combinations of activities were successful in bringing about outcomes and changes in community pride.

In North of Tyne, physical improvements to local spaces were accompanied by event-led activities, community-led initiatives and volunteering. Evidence suggests that this blend matters, visible renewal demonstrates that places are valued, and participation through events and volunteering creates shared experience and social recognition, which together underpin growth in pride.

In Maidstone, the strongest signals came from coupling a hands-on greening offer with volunteering and a prominent cultural intervention in the town centre.

In Wyre, the pathway to improved community pride was reported to use cumulative, highly localised improvements and repeated activities. Evidence suggests these are in place (such as work to upgrade facilities alongside a programme of arts and heritage events to reinforce community identity), but a longer observation window is needed to confirm impact.

2.2.15 Impacts on community pride

Where measured, impacts on community pride align with the mechanisms described below.

In North of Tyne, the Community Life Survey showed that the share of residents saying they are proud to live in their area increased in all three constituent authorities over the period observed, 66% to 69% in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 69% to 76.3% in Northumberland, and 68% to 71.8% in North Tyneside, from 2023/24 to 2024/25, with levels higher than the England average in both years. Local evaluation evidence attributed improved community pride to refurbished public spaces, visibility through media and social channels, and the role of volunteering and social action enabled by improved settings.

In Maidstone, qualitative evidence showed that participants in a greening volunteer project reported feeling more connected to their community. An independent evaluation of the town-wide cultural initiative found that most visitors said it created a sense of community and almost all expressed pride in having it locally. Resident surveys indicate a broader context of positive connection: two-thirds of respondents reported a strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood, and pride measures in official statistics rose from just over half to just under two-thirds between survey waves.

In Redbridge, an independent evaluation of the restored country park reported that almost all visitors rated their experience positively, with qualitative accounts describing a step-change in the site's appeal and external recognition through a public vote for the park in the Keep Britain Tidy People Choice Award, which was interpreted by delivery partners as an indicator of pride.

2.3 Increased footfall / usage

H11.2-3 UKSPF funding creates new facilities/improved facilities that meet local demand, resulting in increased usage.

This section examines two closely related hypotheses: first, that creating new facilities would increase community usage; second, that improving existing facilities would do the same. The shared expectation was that where provision gaps were filled, accessibility barriers reduced, and buildings and spaces were made more functional, attractive and welcoming, more people would use them more often, for a wider range of purposes and by a broader cross-section of the community. The evidence from both strands is presented together as a single account of how

capital investment translated into higher usage. Three out of 33 place-level evaluations assessed whether new facilities would drive increased usage and found evidence to confirm this. 11 of 33 place-level evaluations tested whether improving facilities would drive increased usage, with seven confirming the hypothesis.

2.3.1 Mechanisms supporting increased use

The evidence describes a consistent set of mechanisms through which funding translated into higher usage, often acting in combination.

Addressing evidenced gaps in provision generated immediate demand. Additions such as new accessible toilets, especially in rural areas, removed practical barriers to spending time locally and enabled longer events and activities that were previously constrained.

Functional upgrades to community buildings expanded how they could be used, by whom and when. Works intended venues to become more usable year-round and suitable for a broader range of activities and users.

Safety and inclusive design improvements made outdoor spaces safer, more inclusive and engaging and drew in people across age groups.

Co-location of services and practical amenities within accessible, visible locations increased daily throughput. Proximity to transport, prominent locations and environments designed around user needs were considered during redevelopments.

Informal communal spaces, either new or enhanced, encouraged wider community use.

Activation events and activities, turned improved facilities into lived experience. New and improved spaces also led to the formation of groups and activities that would not have existed otherwise.

2.3.2 Differences in mechanisms across places

Physical changes were often paired with activation (new groups, programmed sessions, co-location of services), translating improvements quickly into live use. There were fewer examples of infrastructure change without activation.

2.3.3 Impacts on usage

Several mechanisms worked together to improve usage. In the City of Edinburgh, adding an accessible toilet beside a major visitor destination and cruise landing point, open long hours, addressed a basic gap in a high-footfall location and is reported to serve around 1,500 people per week; new community gardens on estates without communal buildings created multi-purpose space for meetings, workshops and classes.

In the West Midlands, relocating and remodelling a multi-service community facility into a central, well-connected site, with dedicated classrooms, private online pods, sensory and clinical rooms, was linked by staff to an increase from about 100 daily users pre-pandemic to over 150 post-refurbishment, as spaces matched user and practitioner needs.

In South East Wales, an all-ability outdoor activity space (launched on 18th September 2024) recorded more than 37,821 uses during the first year, verified by a counter, showing how inclusive design and activation can generate sustained, high-volume community use.

H16.2 Arts/cultural/heritage events attract more people to key locations/town centres

2.3.4 Contribution assessments across places

Place-level evaluations assessed whether arts, cultural and heritage activity, along with targeted improvements to visitor facilities, brought more people into town centres and other key locations. The expectation was that distinctive, well-programmed events would create time-specific reasons to visit; that year-round cultural calendars would cultivate repeat trips; and that upgrades to heritage and community assets would increase dwell time and make visits more enjoyable, thereby raising overall footfall. This was tested in 7 of 33 places, with six places finding evidence to confirm the hypothesis.

2.3.5 Mechanisms supporting improvement in footfall

The evaluation identified several mutually reinforcing mechanisms that supported improved footfall.

Time-limited cultural attractions generated pronounced, but date-specific, surges in footfall – limited evidence of repeated visits could be identified.

Sustained programming increased footfall. Where calendars contained a mix of regular regional events and a steady run of smaller, locally attuned activities, towns created recurring reasons to return that extended beyond one-off spikes.

Local assets upgrades to heritage and leisure sites encouraged longer visits and strengthened the offer once people arrived.

Locally distinctive content used event formats that reflected local identity and made activities easy to access. Delivery often focused on local audiences and used contracts with local traders.

2.3.6 Differences in mechanisms across places

The sequencing and format of programming shaped the pattern of effects across places. One-off, signature events produced sharp, time-limited spikes in visits and trading, while a sustained, town-wide calendar of inclusive cultural offers raised opportunities for repeat footfall. Activities that linked multiple sites (such as trails and interactive games) dispersed movement throughout centres, whereas single-site events concentrated flows and trading effects locally.

2.3.7 Impacts on footfall

The immediate effects of the interventions on footfall were visible in the data and accounts provided. In Newcastle-under-Lyme, UKSPF-funded festivals drove both sustained attendances and a weekend where movement through the centre increased by 220% relative to a typical weekend.

In South Yorkshire, reported footfall was 67,614 across the region; multiple events (e.g. Winter Festival Rotherham, Children's Capital of Culture, Women of the World festival) registered strong

attendances and year-on-year growth in attendee numbers, alongside qualitative indications that people felt more likely to return. The Roots street carnival in Rotherham saw attendance increase by 67% between 2024 and 2025 to 11,100).

In Wyre, the local programme delivered improvements to the town centre and high street, enhancing existing cultural and heritage institutions as well as local arts & creative activities. Programme outcomes exceeded targets, with 24,000 additional visitors and almost 5,000 additional users. Case studies demonstrate how events and facility upgrades result in new visitors and repeat use.

2.4 Increased community engagement

H12.1 and H12.2 Capacity building support creates more volunteering opportunities and leads to more volunteering.

Two combined hypotheses examined whether capacity building support for voluntary and community sector organisations creates more volunteering opportunities, and whether these were taken up by volunteers, driving community activity. This was framed variously as creating more volunteering opportunities to be taken up by individuals, strengthening organisational capacity so that groups can recruit and retain volunteers more effectively, and expanding community capacity and reach in ways that support more community-led activity and participation. In some places, these hypotheses explicitly linked investment in facilities and staffing to both the creation of new roles and the conditions that make volunteering more attractive and sustainable.

UKSPFs contribution to increases in volunteering opportunities were assessed in 10 of 33 places. In nine of these, the contribution claim was supported. Six further places assessed whether UKSPF funding had contributed to increased volunteering, with five finding evidence to confirm this.

2.4.1 Mechanisms supporting improvement in volunteering opportunities

Organisational capacity building. Grants and support enabled organisations to hire or retain staff dedicated to volunteer development, put in place governance and volunteer management systems, and design structured opportunities with clear roles, training and supervision.

Investment in facilities. A second mechanism was investment in assets and facilities that volunteers use or help to maintain.

Embedding volunteering into delivery. A third mechanism involved embedding volunteering into operating models for organisations focussed on cultural, heritage, environmental and community safety activities. This created pathways for participants to gain skills and confidence while contributing to visible local outcomes.

Volunteer administration improvements. A fourth mechanism, used selectively, was systems development to make volunteering easier to navigate. This included work to standardise training and plan digital platforms that could formalise volunteer records and simplify onboarding.

Advice and guidance complemented grant support in some areas, helping smaller groups to strengthen their governance, plan volunteer roles safely and confidently, and embed volunteer management into day-to-day practice.

2.4.2 Differences in mechanisms across places

Across places, UKSPF-backed activity expanded volunteering by creating a higher number of better-designed roles (opportunities) and increasing the number of people stepping into them (participation). Delivery teams used a mix of capacity building (staffing, systems, governance), asset and facility improvements, and targeted outreach and brokerage to make roles easier to design, advertise and manage, to make volunteering more appealing and practical on the ground, and to match residents into roles with appropriate training and support.

Where organisations lacked structured volunteer programmes or there was no brokerage service, funding coordinators and on-the-ground support had immediate effects and filled coordination gaps (e.g., Southend-on-Sea; Newcastle-under-Lyme; Tamworth).

Where capacity already existed at scale, support helped prevent duplication, though in some places (Highlands) additional roles did not immediately translate into higher participation due to limited remaining capacity to manage volunteer programmes.

Physical context influenced appeal and role design. Upgrading volunteer-facing facilities and major green/heritage assets made roles more practical year-round and drew in new volunteers (e.g., Highlands, Redbridge, East Riding of Yorkshire, Wyre).

2.4.3 Impacts on volunteering opportunities and volunteering numbers

The reported impacts on volunteering opportunities and numbers were both quantitative and qualitative.

In Chesterfield, 491 volunteer roles were supported and 255 volunteers trained. Survey responses indicated that organisations relied on the funding to deliver activity and that the support contributed to the creation of more opportunities, though the small sample limited generalisability.

In Liverpool City Region, 723 volunteers were recorded in monitoring information. Structured analysis of social media commentary before and after the intervention period indicated increased positive sentiment related to local volunteering activity in a public park (157% increase from the baseline).

Across North Wales, created opportunities reached very high volumes (17,042). Most surveyed organisations (24/30) increased roles, many (20/30) attributing all or part of that increase to the funding. Coaching and leadership support were credited with building confidence to open up volunteering for the first time in some groups. Asset improvements created long-term volunteering roles anchored in local pride and responsibility. Coordinated approaches made recruitment and retention easier across the area.

H12.3 Community engagement activities lead to participation in community life

This hypothesis tested whether UKSPF-backed community engagement and capacity-building activities would increase participation in community life. This was framed as strengthening the reach and capability of community organisations; creating and supporting volunteering opportunities; animating places through local events and programmes; and improving facilities so that more people could participate. Some places also tested whether engagement embedded in local planning and consultation would bring more residents into community processes and strengthen social connections. This contribution claim was assessed in 9 out of 33 places, with eight places finding that this claim was supported by the evidence.

2.4.4 Mechanisms supporting increased participation in community life

The evidence points to several complementary mechanisms by which the fund enabled increased participation.

Targeted grants and support to community-based activity gave local groups the means to reach further and run more inclusive programmes, operating through small awards and advice that expanded organisational capacity, often in places with higher deprivation and limited infrastructure.

Staffing and management capacity including dedicated roles meant more consistent promotion, better signposting into opportunities, improved training and supervision, and more responsive support to residents. This capacity also underpinned the creation and maintenance of volunteering opportunities, which themselves are a pathway into community life.

Improvements to facilities and assets including enhancements to community spaces, heritage and environmental sites, and basic volunteer amenities (such as access to hot water, storage and equipment) made it easier for people to attend, volunteer and spend time together.

Place-based activities and programming included events and participatory programmes that drew people into shared activity at scale. Arts, heritage, youth, environmental and wellbeing offers were used to convene residents around collaborative experiences. These were described as catalysts for social connection, confidence-building and onward participation.

Structured consultation and engagement related to local planning processes and engaged residents in civic discussions. Where groups used funding to resource consultation, they provided multiple ways to contribute (online, postal and in-person), which broadened participation and surfaced views from younger people as well as adults.

Digital and outreach tools including outreach events and online channels to support civic participation raised awareness of opportunities. In some settings, general practice and public health teams signposted residents to community groups as part of wellbeing support, embedding participation within local care pathways.

2.4.5 Differences in mechanisms across places

Approaches varied in emphasis and intensity, shaping both who participated and the scale of change.

Most places opted for a combined approach, investing in people (staffing and training), places (upgraded facilities) and programmes (restoration and social activity) that together deepened

participation. In the City of Edinburgh, the offer combined very high volumes of supported volunteering opportunities and created roles with place-based engagement in community gardens and a volunteering initiative supporting older residents.

Some places considered more frequent, accessible participation as a means to consolidate community participation. Gateshead concentrated on large-scale activation through local events and programmes across youth, arts and outdoor activity, with provision tailored to local need and focused on progression into further volunteering opportunities.

Some interventions prioritised specific localities, for example, areas of high deprivation or poor community infrastructure. For example, Chesterfield's interventions focussed on growing community and voluntary sector activity through small grants, community development support and training. Engagement included family social events, youth activities and gardening projects, and respondents described being able to provide regular, free, welcoming spaces in communities facing financial hardship. The mechanism here centred on distributed, light-touch capacity building that translated quickly into local participation.

2.4.6 Impacts on participation in community life

The reported impacts on participation in community life were both quantitative and qualitative, and they varied by area. Chesterfield recorded a 92% rise in community engagement following their programme of community interventions, equivalent to 217 additional individuals participating³, with grant recipients reporting extended reach and new participants. Interview evidence noted improved delivery capacity in deprived areas and better access to services, with testimonials describing regular, free, welcoming spaces that reduced financial barriers.

In the City of Edinburgh, output volumes for supported and created volunteering opportunities, and improved engagement, were above or close to targets. Among garden users near intervention sites, a significantly higher share (25%) reported feeling more involved or connected than in comparison places (13%). Volunteer hours in one project roughly doubled over a multi-year period, up from 3,500 in 2021/22 to 7,290 in 2024/25.

2.4.7 Contextual and process conditions supporting community engagement

The interpretation of QCA results offers some valuable insights:

Two contextual conditions influenced the level of engagement achieved across places. Places that were rural (Consistency⁴ 0.66) and of lower deprivation (Consistency 0.88) reported relatively higher numbers of people engaged in community activities as result of funded support, in relation to the overall number of people volunteering in the area (as captured in the CLS data).

³ Exact timescales not available from monitoring information

⁴ Consistency indicates the proportion of causal configurations that lead to the same outcome. If a consistency score is 1, the configuration of conditions is fully consistent with the outcome. That is, all cases with respective membership scores (have the same configuration – or combination – of conditions) have the same outcome. The cut-off score for consistency for fuzzy sets is 0.8. So, at least 80% of cases within a solution must have the same configuration of conditions and the same outcome.

Use of existing delivery partners was negatively correlated with achievement levels (Consistency 0.9822). This suggests that places that commissioned new delivery partnerships experienced higher levels of community engagement.

Provision continuity drove achievement when combined with referrals from non UKSPF interventions (Consistency 1.0) and digital marketing (Consistency 1.0) as beneficiary engagement strategies. This signals that places that capitalised on existing schemes were more likely to engage higher numbers of individuals when creating pathways between other community engagement programmes or investing in digital recruitment.

Similarly, direct commissioning also drove achievement when combined with referrals from non UKSPF interventions (Consistency 0.66) and digital marketing (Consistency 0.66) as beneficiary engagement strategies. This also reinforces a key process finding for the Communities and Place Investment Priority, that direct commissioning was an effective tool in quickly getting off the ground and enhancing intervention designs that were known to work. Trust and reliance on the existing community ecosystem yielded positive results in terms of community engagement.

2.5 Increased community capacity

H14.1 Support for voluntary/community organisations increases their capacity and reach, leading to more community-led activity

2.5.1 Contribution assessments across places

The hypothesis being examined here is that support to voluntary and community organisations, for example through grants and advisory support, increased organisational capacity and reach. This would in turn lead to more community-led activity. The contribution claim was assessed in 12 out of 33 places. In all 12 of these places, the claim was supported.

2.5.2 Mechanisms supporting increased community led activity

Several common mechanisms were identified across the portfolio of delivery.

Flexible grant funding and advisory support covering both revenue and capital, allowed groups to address their own organisational needs alongside community demand. The value of the grants varied between places and organisations, ranging anywhere between £5,000 and £150,000.

Advisory support including one-to-one guidance, bid support and training enabled organisations to expand or adapt services, extend reach into priority communities and test or scale new delivery. This advisory support was often delivered alongside the grant funding described above. Smaller voluntary organisations reported being able to access funding they would not otherwise have secured, deepening experience that could be applied to future opportunities.

Targeted skills, governance and leadership development including training in governance, finance, charitable law and fundraising equipped staff and trustees to run organisations more effectively. Coaching and leadership support for third sector leaders strengthened confidence and operational capability. Training in these organisations also increased their capacity to recruit and support volunteers and create natural pathways for community participation.

Capital works to improve community assets and volunteer environments such as repairs, accessibility upgrades, energy efficiency measures, and digital infrastructure for hubs improved the quality, safety and usability of facilities.

Digital connectivity upgrades including the Installation of secure, site-wide Wi-Fi, improved broadband and devices increased organisational capacity and extended reach. Some sites intentionally extended connectivity beyond building footprints to widen access.

2.5.3 Differences in mechanisms across places

Approaches varied in emphasis, scale and balance between revenue support, capital improvement and systems change.

Flexible grants were often provided in combination with advisory support. Many places reported positive outcomes using this model, including Chesterfield, County Durham, East Riding of Yorkshire, North East Derbyshire, North East Lincolnshire, SE Wales and Tamworth.

Some places utilised grants without any advisory support, usually for specific capital investments or to provide a new service. For example, in Liverpool City Region, grants were provided to improve broadband connectivity in community facilities.

Other places focussed on training and skills interventions to improve the capacity of the VCSE (Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise) sector. Wyre provided training for volunteers who reported improved skills, confidence and preparedness to support future activity. Organisations, supported by the council team, gained experience of compliant applications and target setting, in some cases formalising structures to receive funds.

2.5.4 Impacts on community led activity

Impacts of these mechanisms were evidenced through monitoring outputs and qualitative accounts of change. These included increased reach, improved connectivity and improved skills.

In Chesterfield, 6/10 beneficiary organisations engaged reported larger reach, 5/10 reported increases in organisational expertise and networks, and one organisation described expanded or improved activities. Examples included one-off outreach that reached mostly new participants and expanded well-being activity reaching new audiences. In East Riding of Yorkshire, 376 volunteering opportunities were created, and interviewees attributed increases in activities and reach to the UKSPF funding.

In County Durham, 18 premises enhanced their digital connectivity, and in Liverpool City Region 93 sites reported improved connectivity, with 162 sites reporting increased numbers of IT users. Providers reported widened reach, improved operations and new drop-in digital services.

In Wyre, volunteers qualitatively reported strengthened skills and well-being; organisations gained experience applying for and delivering externally funded project and improved bid quality was observed in later rounds.

2.6 Anti-crime and Anti-social behaviour measures

H15.1-2 Upgrading anti-crime/anti-ASB infrastructure reduces crime and ASB in the local area

Two closely related hypotheses were tested during place-level evaluation.

The first hypothesis was that upgrading anti-crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) infrastructure and increasing enforcement resources reduces crime and ASB. The theory was that combinations of physical measures (for example, CCTV and lighting), enhanced policing or enforcement presence, and community-facing approaches discouraged potential offenders. Seven places out of 33 evaluated this hypothesis. Of these, the contribution claim was supported in three places, while in four places the claim was undetermined. This was due to challenges with attribution either from other interventions taking place at the same time in the same location or due to inconclusive evidence/a greater breadth of research needed.

The second hypothesis tested whether place-based safety measures such as upgraded surveillance, improved lighting, and increased visible presence would reduce residents' fear of crime and anti-social behaviour. The visible, credible action to deter and respond to offending would reassure the public, make public spaces feel safer, and encourage use of those spaces, especially after dark. This hypothesis was evaluated in four places out of 34. In two places the contribution claim was supported, and in other two the claim was undetermined, due to mixed conclusions provided by quantitative and qualitative evidence.

The same mechanisms were utilised to lead to both actual reductions in crime and ASB and to reduce fear.

2.6.1 Mechanisms supporting reductions in crime/ASB

Several mechanisms were tested, often in combination, to deter offending, increase detection, and improve public reassurance.

Upgraded visible surveillance and evidence capture. Many places invested in CCTV, including mobile units and borough-wide upgrades. The mechanism reported was twofold: visible cameras signalling a greater risk of identification (deterrence), and higher-quality footage enabling more effective enforcement and follow-up.

Targeted policing presence and responsive channels. Increased visible presence, through uniformed patrols, dedicated officers in specific locations, and the use of community-facing bases, was used to reduce crime. This enabled regular patrols, faster response, and closer engagement. In one place this was combined with a direct phone line for the public to report issues, improving perceptions of responsiveness.

Designing out risk through environmental improvements. Street lighting was used to eliminate poorly lit areas and increase natural surveillance, with an explicit rationale of discouraging ASB and reducing crime.

Diversion and community engagement. In some places, enforcement was complemented by activities to engage young people in structured alternatives to offending. This had been described as part of a shift from a reactive to a more proactive approach to ASB.

2.6.2 Differences in mechanisms across places

Different places took different approaches to reducing crime, which was tailored to the specifics of the locality.

Liverpool City Region deployed a suite of measures including visible surveillance technologies, dedicated patrols and engagement in parks, improved lighting, and a direct reporting line. Stakeholders consistently linked these measures to increased feelings of being “looked out for” and improved perceptions of safety in parks, with positive resident feedback on the patrol-and-response model.

Other places tended to focus on either environmental design mechanisms or preventative (visual, enhanced patrol etc.) mechanisms on their own. Maidstone focused on repairing or replacing street lighting in and around the town centre to discourage ASB and reduce crime, which appeared to have contributed towards increased footfall in the evening, more youth activities and reduced public concern about safety at night.

The UKSPF programme in Torridge increased visible policing in a town-centre square by establishing a local base and installed CCTV, and the area had seen a steep decline in crime and ASB.

2.6.3 Impacts on crime/ASB

There was clear evidence of reductions in crime/ASB at intervention sites, although in some places there were challenges with attributing this to the UKSPF interventions.

Wyre upgraded surveillance across 36 sites district-wide and refurbished the CCTV control room, with volunteers operating the system. However, there had been a slight increase in borough wide crime and ASB incidents, although this could be due to improvements in the identification and logging of criminal activity with the new equipment.

Hastings did not directly target crime/ASB, but a neighbourhood-focused approach coincided with a near-50% fall in reported ASB incidents on an estate between the second and third years of delivery. Stakeholders agreed the programme’s focus raised awareness and helped address issues.

In Torridge, interventions appeared to contribute to a large reduction in crime and ASB, and this was also observed in Watford, although other interventions were also targeting a similar reduction in crime in these areas.

2.6.4 Impacts on fear of crime/ASB

In Wyre, stakeholders reported substantial increases in downloads of surveillance footage by the police and practical uses of the system (for example, in supporting missing-person searches). They believed that public perceptions on crime would take time to adjust and that awareness of the improvements was limited. According to the 2025 Life in Wyre survey the majority of respondents

feel less safe than they did two years, however of those respondents who reported feeling safer some explicitly associated this with upgraded surveillance.

3. Impact evaluation – Supporting Local Business

3.1 Supporting Local Business overview

This section examines the contribution of UKSPF interventions under the Supporting Local Business investment priority to business and employment outcomes. It focuses on a selection of standard outcomes observed across several case study places, and examines what mechanisms enabled the outcomes, how they differed across places, and what impact was observed in local places as a result of UKSPF. This chapter covers the outcomes and hypotheses in Table 3.1.

Overall, 93% of hypotheses relating to Supporting Local Business interventions were supported. Hypotheses that UKSPF improved business innovation through research and development (R&D) and supported business survival through grants/advice were less likely to be assessed as supported than other types of intervention. Business support to improve growth prospects and develop new products or technologies were most successful. Employability programmes were frequently assessed as helping individuals secure employment.

Table 3.1. Contribution hypothesis assessment for Supporting Local Business outcomes

Contribution hypothesis	Number of places where hypothesis tested	Proportion of places where hypotheses rated "supported" (%)
Business growth /increased turnover Business support programmes support growth for beneficiary businesses	20	75%
Business births Business support programmes support the establishment of new businesses	18	100%
Increased innovation Business support is associated with businesses developing and launching new products, technology, or processes, as a result of financial support, training, or advice	12	83%
R&D support enables businesses to be more confident in undertaking innovation	3	33%
Increased productivity Business support (grants, training, advice) helps businesses implement changes that increase productivity	10	70%
Business survival Grants and business support services help increase outputs/lowers costs, improving cash flow and leading to increased business survival	6	33%
Jobs created/employment gained		

Business support enables businesses to hire new staff	16	75%
Employability and skills-based learning programmes help individuals secure employment	11	91%
Overall		93%

3.2 Business growth

H1.1 Business support programmes support growth for beneficiary businesses.

Across all case study places, the evaluation examined whether UKSPF-funded business support programmes supported growth for beneficiary businesses. The underlying expectation was that financial and non-financial support would lower capability and cost barriers so firms could invest in equipment, premises, skills and commercial functions; improve marketing, digital and operational practices; reach new customers and markets; and, in turn, increase sales/turnover, profit margins, and relatedly, productivity and employment, or strengthen resilience.

3.2.1 Summary of contribution assessments

Contribution hypotheses were supported in 20 places. For the remaining 5, the hypotheses were undetermined. Several places assessed additional, related outcomes (for example, business survival), but these are reported here only where they were used to evidence growth.

3.2.2 Mechanisms that enabled business growth

Financial support reduced the risk and immediacy of cash outlays for growth activities. This unlocked or accelerated investments that firms reported they could not otherwise have afforded or would have undertaken later or at smaller scale.

Advisory support, including one-to-one diagnostics, tailored mentoring and targeted workshops helped firms translate goals into concrete plans. In some places, expert advice addressed discrete barriers such as HR compliance or process mapping.

Digital, marketing, and export capability development mechanisms expanded reach and improved business lead generation. Support to build websites, implement customer relationship tools, establish social media channels, and professionalise branding enabled firms to reach customers beyond their immediate locality and convert interest into sales more effectively. In a smaller number of cases, export grants and advice were available.

Networking and peer support opened access to learning, referrals and new customers. In localities where entrepreneurs were less likely to engage with mainstream support, tailored, community-based delivery increased participation and provided locally specific routes to advice and markets.

Efficiency measures including grants and advice to reduce energy costs or improve operational processes. This was intended to lead to lower overheads and, in specific cases, measurable cost savings.

Physical trading space where areas expanded market facilities or provided temporary marketplaces were made available, new and early-stage businesses described using these as

stepping stones to build customer bases, generate income and, in some cases, move to permanent premises.

3.2.3 Differences in mechanisms and effects across places

The same broad mechanisms were deployed across places, but their emphasis and the way they were combined varied by local context, and this shaped both take-up and outcomes.

Where capability and confidence were the primary constraints, personalised advisory support was more effective. In Richmond, one-to-one diagnostics and mentoring were credited by businesses with improving client management, pricing and strategic decision-making, and interviewees linked the advice to turnover gains and enhanced viability.

In urban places with wider market access, blended models were prevalent. In South East Wales and Glasgow City Region, the combination of grants that funded tangible investments with consultancy on digital and commercial capability produced adoption of new technologies and increases in sales/turnover and profit margins.

In places focusing on energy cost reduction as routes to growth, improvements to process efficiency were prominent. In South Yorkshire, grants for energy improvements and training on sustainability produced measurable savings and improved financial sustainability for recipients, with cited examples of reduced gas costs and annual savings for community facilities.

3.2.4 Impacts on business growth

Across places, these mechanisms were associated with increases in sales/turnover, profit margins, productivity and jobs, and with firms entering new markets and adopting new products, services and technologies. Evidence maturity varied, but the direction of travel was consistent.

Several places showed clear signals of growth. In East Riding of Yorkshire, more than a third of firms that set turnover targets reported achieving them, just under half achieved profit targets, and contract wins were reported by six firms who had received support, totalling £7.56 million.

In Cardiff Capital Region, survey evidence showed that 58% of respondents reported turnover increases following support, and among those reporting increases the average uplift was 11% when comparing the financial year before and after receiving support, with the smallest firms seeing the largest proportional gains.

In Mid Wales, most businesses who responded to the survey reported turnover increases, typically between 5 and 25 percent, with most attributing a portion of the increase to the grant, and many anticipating further gains over the next year.

In some places, the evidence was positive but not yet conclusive. In Blaby and Chesterfield, it was too early to assess turnover robustly, although limited sample evidence pointed to aggregate employment growth among supported firms in one case and a doubling of profits for one firm.

3.3 Business births

H2.1: Business support programmes support the establishment of new businesses.

UKSPF was designed to boost local economies by stimulating entrepreneurship and supporting the establishment of new businesses. Several local places funded interventions to address barriers faced by new enterprises through structured business support programmes. The support provided under the UKSPF encompassed financial aid, mentorship, skill enhancement, and facilitation of networking opportunities, often tailored to meet specific regional demands. All 18 case studies that evaluated this hypothesis found that UKSPF had contributed to business births.

3.3.1 Mechanisms supporting business births

The business support implemented through the UKSPF was multifaceted, responding to the unique needs of local entrepreneurs. Case studies that analysed this outcome consistently reported evidence that UKSPF had contributed to the working of key mechanisms that enabled new enterprises to be started. These mechanisms often interacted, creating an ecosystem that promoted entrepreneurial success by providing foundational support, guidance, and the community engagement necessary for transforming business ideas into reality.

Financial Support most often involved the provision of start-up grants which alleviated initial financial burdens, allowing entrepreneurs to invest in necessary resources such as equipment, premises, or marketing. While most places provided financial support, the scale and structure varied. Some places offered small, targeted grants to help cover crucial start-up costs, while others provided more substantial capital assistance aimed at larger initial investments.

Mentorship and Advisory Services were designed to equip entrepreneurs with vital knowledge and skills for entrepreneurship. These services consisted of personalised advisory sessions, hands-on workshops, and continuous mentoring programmes. Mentorship programmes were tailored differently, with some places emphasising personalised, one-on-one advisory sessions, while others focused more on group workshops and seminars.

Networking including UKSPF funded events provided platforms for entrepreneurs to connect with industry peers and leaders, and develop valuable business relationships. Communities of practice contributed to the exchange of ideas and best practice. In places with stronger pre-existing entrepreneurial ecosystems, networking efforts concentrated on integrating new entrepreneurs into these networks. Conversely, in places where such ecosystems were less developed, initiatives often focused on creating new networking platforms to foster connections and collaboration.

3.3.2 Differences between approaches and impact on business births

The case studies revealed varying extents of business births across places. While the exact number of business births varied, the common factor across places was the targeted support provided by UKSPF programmes, aligning financial, advisory, and networking services to meet local needs.

Where advice and brokerage were the binding constraints, there were small successes: North Ayrshire met its target with 28 business births attributed to tailored consultancy allied to financial support, and Watford exceeded its goal with 32 starts where one-to-one guidance and modest incentives helped founders get over the line.

In places that emphasised ecosystem building, peer networks and local brokerage mattered: in Newcastle-under-Lyme, 44 new enterprises reported stronger entrepreneurial infrastructure and networking that connected founders to premises, suppliers and early customers.

At the smallest scale, personalised mentoring was effective. In Adur, five new businesses were linked to participation in a business support offer, with evidence that one-to-one support translated intent into action.

Even where precise counts were not tracked, the qualitative picture was consistent: in Hastings, workshops and networking through a local training hub were repeatedly cited by participants as the springboard for several new ventures.

3.3.3 Contextual and process conditions supporting business births

Qualitative Comparative Analysis indicated that business birth rates improved more outside Combined Authorities places (e.g. upper and lower tier council areas), which had a higher UKSPF funding allocation per head and greater satisfaction with stakeholder engagement during intervention design. (*Consistency: 0.8227; Coverage⁵: 0.8188*).

Process evaluation evidence supports the QCA finding that lower funding allocations (e.g. the minimum for £1m to smaller places) may have limited the extent to which interventions could lead to the birth of new businesses. Stakeholders reported that existing limitations to funding played a role in how they designed their interventions, namely, a preference for continuity programmes and grant models that could quickly energise the entrepreneurial potential in their localities. It is possible that places with higher amounts of per capita funding could also rely more on (low risk) grant models that immediately remove barriers to business initiation, leading to more observable results within the timeframe of UKSPF (as described in the mechanisms above).

The importance of stakeholder engagement in UKSPF design on business births was also reflected in the process evaluation. Even in places where engagement with relevant bodies and local businesses was undertaken, there was an appetite for more consultation and a tailoring of the offer to the local business culture, thus ensuring that target populations could be effectively identified and engaged. This could explain why places where stakeholders were more satisfied with the level of engagement showcased higher achievement of this outcome.

The QCA suggests that in places where delivery was led by Combined Authorities, the rate of business births was lower than in programmes led by individual authorities. Interpretation of this is challenging but this could reflect the importance of hyper local support, more tailored to the needs of entrepreneurs, and hyper local engagement strategies, in driving new business births.

3.4 Business innovation

H3.1 Business support is associated with businesses developing and launching new products, technology, or processes, as a result of financial support, training, or advice.

⁵ Coverage shows how much (the proportion) of an outcome that is explained by a configuration. The closer to 1, the higher the coverage. Coverage indicates the extent to which the outcome of interest is covered by the conditions.

Across the case studies, the hypothesis tested whether and the extent to which business support was associated with businesses developing and launching new products, technologies or processes. The expected pathway was that grants would de-risk investment in equipment and infrastructure; advice and training would build capability and confidence; and, together, these would translate into adoption and diffusion of new-to-firm technologies and processes, development of new products/services, and progress through research and development stages.

3.4.1 Summary of contribution assessments

Most places concluded that the contribution claim was supported (10 out of 12 places). Two places assessed the claim as undetermined due to limited and early evidence, despite some positive outputs.

3.4.2 Mechanisms enabling innovation

Financial support reduced upfront risk and enabled tangible investments to support innovation. Grants paid for production equipment, digital tools, and premises modifications that directly underpinned new processes and product development. In places where the support focused on decarbonisation, capital helped implement low-carbon technologies.

Advisory, training and diagnostics including one-to-one advice, workshops and mentoring helped firms identify opportunities, produce plans and adopt practical changes to support innovation. In several places, expert input tackled specific barriers (such as HR documentation) and helped firms move from ideas to implementation.

Knowledge transfer facilitation between peers and access to expertise filled skills gaps in product and technology development. In some places, access to academic specialists, student internships and applied innovation support gave firms technical capacity they otherwise lacked.

Thematically focused support tailored to locally specific industries also catalysed innovation. Decarbonisation-oriented support encouraged the adoption of low-carbon processes (for example, carbon reduction planning), while agri-tech focused interventions combined structured diagnostic mentoring with farmers and small test-and-learn grants to encourage on-farm.

3.4.3 Differences in mechanisms and effects across places

The same broad tools were used, but their emphasis varied by context, shaping what changed and how quickly.

In places where access to capability was a constraint, knowledge transfer was decisive. In Newcastle-under-Lyme, firms used access to university expertise and student talent to complete app-based products, bring software development in-house and progress towards commercial launch. Beneficiaries reported that without this embedded expertise, development would have taken longer and cost more.

Some places had a primary need for process and digital modernisation, and in these cases, advisory-led models of support dominated. In Gateshead, a strong digital thread ran through adoption stories: firms implemented new online tools, improved websites and social channels, and introduced AI-assisted content creation after structured diagnostics and hands-on guidance.

Where innovation journeys were already under way, UKSPF support accelerated progress through R&D stages. In Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, businesses reported moving from early proof-of-concept stages to large-scale testing, with 24% of businesses surveyed completing their research and development for a product or service following support. Management information identifies 167 new or improved products, of which 55 were new to market, demonstrating extensive creation of new or improved products/services alongside widespread adoption of new-to-firm technologies/processes.

Where the policy focus was decarbonisation, process innovation was the primary outcome with product development following on. In North Wales, firms introduced low-carbon technologies and new operational practices, often after feasibility studies de-risked decisions. Project leads emphasised capacity building and the creation of “champions” within firms to sustain adoption over time.

3.4.4 Impacts on beneficiary businesses

Across places, monitoring information and beneficiary feedback point to substantial adoption of new-to-firm technologies and processes, and to significant numbers of new or improved products/services.

East Riding of Yorkshire exceeded targets, with 92 enterprises developing new products/services and 66 adopting new-to-firm technologies/processes.

South Hams recorded 43 beneficiaries adopting new-to-firm products and processes, well in excess of target (14). As a result of the Agri-innovation project, farms adopted new approaches to resource management and productivity, and 24 new products and services were brought to market after field testing.

A small number of places reported positive activity but judged it too early to confirm causality. In Chesterfield, monitoring data recorded businesses adopting innovation-related measures and case studies showed concrete changes (for example, a capacity-boosting equipment upgrade), but the contribution assessment remained undetermined due to limited data and potential overlap with other initiatives.

H3.3 R&D support enables businesses to be more confident in undertaking innovation.

Place-level evaluations hypothesised that research and development support would reduce perceived risk and build capability, thereby increasing businesses’ confidence to undertake innovation. Greater confidence was expected to manifest as businesses progressed concepts to testing and implementation, reporting fewer barriers (skills, market knowledge, facilities), and sustaining innovation activity.

3.4.5 Summary of contribution assessments

Judgements were varied across the three places where this hypothesis was tested. Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly assessed the contribution claim as supported, based on a quasi-experimental comparison of innovation propensity, a beneficiary survey showing higher self-reported confidence, and triangulating evidence from project evaluations and interviews. City of Edinburgh and South Hams reported the claim as undetermined. In Edinburgh the evaluation found high levels of R&D

engagement and positive qualitative signals, but lacked sufficient evidence to attribute these to UKSPF. In South Hams the evidence base was limited because beneficiary interview numbers were too small.

3.4.6 Mechanisms enabling confidence to innovate through R&D support

Advisory support reduced perceived risk and demystified the innovation process. In agri-tech innovation settings, this involved tailoring knowledge to the farm and building familiarity with testing and learning. Peer groups formed around common themes (for example, soils) to sustain knowledge exchange beyond the formal support.

Knowledge transfer and access to expertise filled skills gaps that often undercut confidence. Access to specialist facilities and testing support, and direct engagement with technical experts featured as a route to move projects through research stages.

3.4.7 Differences in emphasis and effects across places

The confidence-building model looked different by context and as there are only three places to draw evidence from, robust comparisons cannot be made.

3.4.8 Impacts on confidence to innovate

In Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, average self-reported confidence to innovate rose from 6.2 to 8.1 out of 10 across 96 respondents. The same survey found fewer businesses citing innovation skills and knowledge as a barrier, fewer citing market knowledge and feasibility as a barrier, and a notable reduction in reported constraints relating to technology, equipment or facilities. These shifts align with the intended causal chain - better knowledge and capability lead to greater readiness to act.

In Edinburgh, monitoring data recorded 120 newly R&D-active enterprises against a target of 60, and large numbers of businesses participating in early-stage founder events. Qualitative evidence from delivery partners described how consistent funding allowed content and programme length to be refined, improving participant experience.

3.5 Increased productivity

H 4.1 Business support (grants, training, advice) helps businesses implement changes that increase productivity.

The hypothesis tested whether and the extent to which business support (grants, training and advice) helps businesses implement changes that increase productivity. The intended pathway was that reducing financial and capability barriers would enable firms to adopt digital tools, equipment and improved processes; strengthen management and workforce skills; and embed new ways of working that reduce operating costs or time per task. These changes were expected to raise output per hour worked or support closely related operational efficiencies.

3.5.1 Summary of contribution assessments

Most places that examined this outcome concluded that the contribution claim was supported (7 out of 10). The Glasgow City Region and North Ayrshire evaluations assessed the claim as undetermined given limited or unclear quantitative evidence and questions around measurement

and attribution. The evaluation in Torridge also assessed the claim as undetermined at this stage, with evidence of adoption of tools and equipment but insufficient data on realised productivity gains.

3.5.2 Mechanisms enabling productivity improvements

Financial support de-risked and accelerated investment in productivity-enhancing assets. Grants paid for equipment, machinery and digital infrastructure. These investments addressed immediate bottlenecks, automated routine tasks and reduced time spent on certain processes.

Advisory, mentoring and diagnostics including one-to-one guidance and practical workshops helped firms to identify operational bottlenecks, map and streamline processes, refine financial management, and embed more time-efficient routines.

Targeted skills development supported businesses capability to execute tasks more efficiently. Skills brokerage models matched SMEs to funded, short courses on topics such as spreadsheet use, customer service and soft skills, enabling teams to complete routine tasks to a higher standard and with fewer errors. Beneficiaries described cumulative time savings as staff adopted consistent practices, freeing managers to focus on higher-value activities.

Technology adoption including digital adoption and “new-to-firm” processes often underpinned operational efficiency. Many places reported firms adopting digital tools, from content and social media workflows through to AI-assisted tasks and data dashboards.

3.5.3 Contextual and process conditions supporting business productivity

Qualitative Comparative Analysis reports three combinations of place-based and delivery model conditions that appear to drive higher proportions of beneficiary businesses experiencing increased productivity:

- Areas that were not in Wales, and avoided direct commissioning of interventions for their business support offer were more likely to report higher proportion of businesses experiencing increased productivity (Consistency 0.6600; Coverage 0.8571);
- Areas that were not Combined Authorities, and avoided direct commissioning of interventions for their business support offer were more likely to report higher proportion of businesses experiencing increased productivity (Consistency 0.6600; Coverage 0.8571);
- Areas that spent more under the Supporting Local Business Investment Priority and avoided direct commissioning of interventions for their business support offer were more likely to report higher proportion of businesses experiencing increased productivity (Consistency 0.6622; Coverage 0.8571).

In Wales, it was noted that local economic challenges shaped the impact of UKSPF funding. Context reviews at local level highlighted that Wales has experienced lower-than-average productivity levels when compared to the UK as a whole, and that skills gaps is a recurrent challenge for businesses, limiting their ability to increase efficiency of key processes. This is compounded by the rurality of many areas in Wales, which makes attracting the right workforce a consistent challenge.

The QCA also suggests that delivery models led by non-Mayoral Strategic Authorities achieved greater success. As with business births, this emphasises the importance of tailoring offers to local contexts, and to the ability of lower tier administrations to design and target their interventions to ensure beneficiary needs are met consistently.

As with business births, the QCA here highlights a correlation between the amount of funding spent (rather than allocated) and the number of businesses experiencing increased productivity. Combining with process evidence, this points to the ability of local areas to provide direct financial support in the shape of grants which have direct effects in efficiency, for example when spent on equipment or systems upgrades, but also to the enhanced effect observed in areas which could afford to combine grant-led models with advisory support and skills brokerage.

A last condition of interest is the use of direct procurement to commission Supporting Local Business interventions, which the analysis negatively correlated with the business productivity outcome. This should be interpreted with caution, as only one of the areas analysed opted for direct commissioning for their interventions, and there is no direct process evidence outlining clear challenges with this approach.

3.5.4 Impacts on productivity

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly recorded 41 businesses with improved productivity across innovation-focused projects. This was supported by a beneficiary survey in which 40% of respondents (43/105) reported productivity improvements. Project-level evaluations showed firms taking action to improve productivity and planning further steps.

In the Highlands, 30 enterprises reported improved productivity, and 13 of 19 surveyed grant recipients said their productivity had increased, with all of those attributing the increase to the support to at least some extent.

In South West Wales/Swansea Bay, the programme recorded 379 businesses adopting new-to-firm technologies/processes and 210 developing new or improved products/services. Survey data showed 61% of respondents (59/107) applied for the grant to improve productivity and 37 of these reported progress towards that goal.

3.6 Business survival

H5.2 Grants and business support services help increase outputs/lowers costs, improving cash flow and leading to increased business survival.

Across the six places evaluating this outcome, the common hypothesis was that grants and business support services would help increase outputs and/or lower costs (through financial and upskilling methods), improving cash flow and leading to increased business survival.

3.5.1. Summary of contributions assessment

Assessments reached different conclusions depending on the depth and quality of evidence available. In only one area (Adur) was the claim supported. In the other five places the contribution claim was undetermined. All places reported plausible pathways to improved resilience, but limitations such as small samples for research, a short period between support being provided and

research taking place and alternative sources of business support being available prevented a firm attribution to the UKSPF.

3.6.2 Mechanisms supporting business survival

Financial support allowed businesses to make essential investments related to business survival.

Advisory and mentoring enabled businesses to work with advisers to develop tailored action plans, refine target customers, strengthen lead generation, and build sales channels, which then contributed to business survival.

Efficiency audits supported businesses in two places, by providing energy audits and support to design decarbonisation plans (e.g. environmentally friendly infrastructure and processes). This support aimed to reduce energy costs and lower outgoings, supporting cash flow management and business survival.

Visibility and attractiveness improvements linked premises enhancements to increases in footfall, sales and turnover, which increased cash flow and helped businesses to survive.

3.6.3 Differences in mechanisms and effects across places

Although the mechanism set was broadly shared across all six places, the emphasis differed and this shaped the types of effects observed.

In Adur support combined tailored mentoring with light-touch financial support, which appeared to have a strong impact on business survival. The mechanism worked through one-to-one advice improving how firms were run, with better planning, clearer commercial focus, and improved financial management, combined with modest financial inputs that helped remove immediate barriers to trading. This combined approach was also used in Chesterfield, with businesses also reporting positive impacts around increased turnover. However, self-reported business survival did not improve. In North East Lincolnshire, although financial and non-financial support were provided, these appear to have been delivered to different businesses, rather than targeting the same business population.

In Blaby and North East Derbyshire, the delivery model focussed largely on non-financial support, for example focussing on diagnostic one-to-one support, action plans, group training, and referrals to external services, and energy audits. These support packages focussed more on cost reduction than growing the business as a route to survival.

North East Derbyshire and North East Lincolnshire focussed on non-financial support through energy efficiency and decarbonisation planning. The expected route to survival from these support packages was more predictable operating costs and cost reductions through energy efficiency. This support was reported to lead to some large financial savings and contributed towards business survival.

3.6.4 Impact on business survival

In Adur, where the contribution claim was supported, 98% of supported businesses matched to Companies House were still active in August 2025. This compared favourably with contextual figures showing a local business death rate of 3% in March 2024, and 85% of all local businesses

remaining active between July 2024 and August-2025. Participating businesses linked their survival to the support received through UKSPF.

In North East Lincolnshire, substantial premises improvements and safeguarded jobs were recorded, and interviewees pointed to significant energy cost savings among adopters, and in North East Derbyshire businesses had developed decarbonisation plans which were reducing costs. However, stakeholders reported it was too early to link these developments directly to improved survival.

3.7 Jobs created / employment gained

H7.1 Business support enables businesses to hire new staff

This hypothesis tested whether and the extent to which business support enabled firms to hire new staff. The underlying assumption was that a mix of financial and non-financial support would reduce the risks and costs of investment, strengthen commercial and operational capability, improve access to markets and buyers, and thereby increase output or efficiency. These changes were expected to provide the finance and confidence needed to create jobs.

3.7.1 Contribution assessments across places

Contribution to job creation was assessed as supported in 12 of 16 places. In four places (North Ayrshire, North East Derbyshire, Richmond and South Yorkshire), the contribution claim was undetermined due to mixed or insufficient evidence. This was largely due to small samples for data collection, mixed evidence collected from beneficiaries, stakeholders and secondary data sources and challenges interpreting the MI. In North East Derbyshire, although there were recorded jobs created, these were attributed to wider economic conditions.

3.7.2 Mechanisms that enabled businesses to hire new staff

Financial support enabled purchases and upgrades that businesses had deferred or could not self-fund, aiming to eventually lead to productivity improvements and market reach. Grant funding could also be used to make investments to reduce environmental impact.

Tailored advisory and mentoring including diagnostic assessments and one-to-one guidance was provided to businesses to create and implement growth plans, develop and refine sales propositions, pricing strategies and improve budgeting and cash-flow management. With clearer revenue prospects and tighter financial control, firms were enabled to have greater confidence to recruit.

Skills and opportunity matching linked firms to student and graduate placements in some places, which increased short-term capacity and, in several cases, led to permanent roles. Elsewhere, facilitation connected local suppliers to time-sensitive opportunities (for example, in screen production supply chains) or supported firms to become “tender-ready,” increasing success in procurement. Where these opportunities generated new work businesses needed to recruit additional staff.

3.7.3 Differences in mechanisms and effects across places

As with the previous hypothesis, most places used a mix of delivery mechanisms. These typically combined financial and non-financial support, as seen in Chesterfield, County Durham, East Yorkshire, Glasgow City Region, North East Derbyshire and South Yorkshire, South East and South West Wales, all these places reported success in creating job roles. This suggests a that combining different types of support mechanisms works well.

Watford utilised three distinct pathways to creating new jobs. Skills and opportunity brokerage into new markets created immediate workstreams in sectors where opportunities were close to market, leading to rapid job creation. Diagnostics and growth advice supported organic SME expansion, with a longer lag before recruitment materialised. Employer-led workforce development, through standards and training brokerage, built internal capacity that enabled progression and, in turn, new hiring.

However, other places which utilised different or single mechanisms also reported that the mechanisms had worked well. Newcastle-under-Lyme focussed on student and graduate placements. Businesses used short projects to increase capacity and, in several cases, converted placements into permanent roles. One firm retained a placement student as a business improvement consultant. Beneficiary feedback indicated that exposure to graduate talent increased employer appetite to recruit.

3.7.4 Impact on job creation

Job creation outcomes were recorded across many places, albeit at different scales and speeds. Many areas reported job creation in the hundreds. This was the case, for example, in Glasgow (270), South West Wales (983), South Yorkshire (430), and Gateshead (420). More modest increases were reported in other areas, including County Durham (178), East Riding of Yorkshire (133), and Watford (119).

Several places also recorded strong expectations of future hiring, especially where grants had accelerated investment or where advisory support had unlocked access to new markets or clarified forward orders.

H7.2 Employability and skills-based learning programmes help individuals secure employment.

Across all places, the hypothesis assessed was that employability and skills-based learning programmes help individuals to secure employment. The tailored support usually consisted of a combination of assessment, action planning, mentoring with accredited or sector-specific training, job-search preparation, direct links to vacancies, work placements or trials, and in-work support. This was anticipated to lead to reduced barriers to work, align participants' capabilities with employer requirements, and increase transitions into jobs, including sustained employment where the timeframe allowed measurement.

3.7.5 Contribution assessments across places

The contribution claim was supported in all 12 places where it was assessed.

3.7.6 Mechanisms that supported individuals to secure employment

The evidence describes a consistent set of mechanisms that acted on both the supply side (individual readiness and skills) and the demand side (employer expectations and access to vacancies).

Personalised guidance and case management was a very common form of support across all places. Participants typically began with a needs assessment and a jointly agreed plan, supported by a named adviser, addressing practical hurdles, confidence and motivation. This provided continuity and trust.

Accredited and sector-specific training ranged from short certificates required by local employers to sector-focused pathways and foundational skills where these were binding constraints.

Work-focused preparation and brokerage covered CV writing, job-search techniques, vacancy alerts, mock interviews and facilitated introductions to employers.

Supported employment and aftercare for people with disabilities, health conditions or greater distance from the labour market, specialist models were used, sometimes alongside clinical partners.

Community-based engagement and life skills development delivered in trusted local settings, alongside peer learning and practical life-skills provision, aimed to help individuals re-engage with employment.

3.7.7 Differences in mechanisms and effects across places

While the mechanisms were broadly similar, places varied in emphasis, target cohorts and the stage of the employability journey targeted. These differences shaped both the pathways into work and the scale and timing of outcomes.

In County Durham, a strong pipeline from tailored support into jobs was evidenced for people with complex needs. Case material described mental health support alongside volunteering and sector-specific short courses, culminating in paid roles (for example, stewarding following a safety qualification), with practical assistance such as access to equipment and internet to complete applications.

Glasgow City Region placed particular weight on aligning training and certification with employer requirements and on active employer engagement. Local reporting indicated job entry and six-month sustainment above target for key groups. Survey evidence showed that 25% of respondents moved into work after engagement, most crediting the service with making a difference. Participants described apprenticeships and internal roles facilitated by vacancy alerts, interview preparation and coaching. Where progress was slower, basic skills gaps, health and confidence barriers, and a lack of suitable vacancies were the dominant constraints.

Small places such as Hastings focused on tackling confidence and knowledge deficits as stepping stones to work and, for some, self-employment. Monitoring recorded people receiving educational support and employment assistance and reductions in structural barriers. Participant accounts

included movement into jobs within weeks of completing support and transition to self-employment with significant turnover growth after targeted mentoring and workshops. However, discrepancies between centrally reported monitoring data and provider-level counts, alongside the small evidence base, meant the employment-specific claim remained undetermined.

3.7.8 Impact on employment

Reported job entries were significant in most places and aligned with the mechanisms described. With larger areas often reporting job entries in the thousands, in South East Wales, 4,049 people were supported to gain employment and 2,863 were reported to have gained employment. In the West Midlands, monitoring information showed 1,250 job entries, and in South Yorkshire, 936 people entered employment or self-employment following support.

Other areas reported small-scale qualitative data illustrating impact. In Hastings, reductions in barriers and individual accounts of job entry and self-employment were evidenced, but the employment outcome claim remained undetermined due to challenges accessing the population for wider scale research, and attribution constraints.

4. Impact evaluation – People and Skills

4.1 People and Skills overview

This section examines the contribution of UKSPF interventions under the People and Skills investment priority to beneficiaries' skills and employment outcomes. It focuses on a selection of standard outcomes observed across several case study places, and examines what mechanisms enabled the outcomes, how they differed across places, and what impact was observed in local places as a result of UKSPF and covers the outcomes and hypotheses in Table 4.1.

People and Skills hypotheses were frequently assessed as supported, particularly for interventions which helped beneficiaries gain qualifications and interventions which provided employability support to increase job search activity.

Table 4.1 Contribution hypothesis assessment for Supporting Local Business outcomes

Contribution hypothesis	Number of places where hypothesis tested	Proportion of places where hypotheses rated "supported" (%)
Move towards employment Employability and skills-based learning programmes help individuals/beneficiaries become economically active.	16	81%
Upskilling and qualification programmes improve career prospects and lead to progress towards employment (e.g. job interviews)	16	94%
Interventions increase individuals/beneficiaries' confidence in entering the labour market.	17	94%
Employability support leads to increased job searches among beneficiaries/in the local area.	8	100%
Increased skills Interventions help individuals/beneficiaries gain a life/soft skill.	17	94%
Interventions help individuals/beneficiaries gain a qualification.	14	100%
Overall		78%

4.2 Improved employability and economic activity

H8.1 Employability and skills-based learning programmes help individuals/beneficiaries become economically active.

This hypothesis tested whether employability and skills-based learning programmes helped individuals become economically active. The intended pathway combined keyworker support, soft and basic skills training, short, accredited courses and licences, and tailored job-search and brokerage. Together, these were expected to reduce practical and structural barriers (such as low

confidence, poor health and wellbeing, digital exclusion, lack of qualifications and work experience). With barriers lowered, beneficiaries would be in a position to engage actively with the labour market, progress into further training or volunteering, eventually moving into employment.

4.2.1 Summary of contribution assessments

Most places that examined this outcome judged the contribution claim to be supported (13 of 16), reporting successful movement along the pathway into economic activity across places.

4.2.2 Mechanisms enabling people to become economically active

Personalised keyworker support started with barrier triage and an agreed action plan, typically moving into short, job-relevant training (for example, sector-specific licences, essential digital skills, first aid, customer service and ESOL), or into volunteering and work placements to build experience. Employability basics were covered including referral to specialist partners where needed (for example, mental health, neurodiversity and SEND support, benefits advice). For those furthest from work ongoing person-centred support underpinned progress. Providers emphasised tailored, wrap-around help, using volunteering, incremental skills gains and routine building as practical bridges.

Soft skills and confidence building were integral. Group workshops and short courses focused on life skills, wellbeing and motivation; beneficiaries commonly described feeling more able to take first steps, less isolated, and clearer about pathways into work.

Volunteering and placements provided practical stepping stones to employment. Participants used volunteering to develop communication and core employability skills, rebuild confidence and increase job-readiness, with some moving into paid roles (for example, support roles in health settings).

4.2.4 Contextual and process conditions supporting economic activity

The QCA draws attention to two combinations of conditions that led to increased numbers of people moving into economic activity following UKSPF-funded support:

- Areas with higher funding allocation per capita, enhanced by cross referrals / digital marketing beneficiary outreach modalities, in areas that did not use a Combined Authority delivery model (Consistency 0.9183, Coverage 0.8077);
- Areas outside of Scotland that did not use a Combined Authority delivery model (e.g. primarily single tier LA models), with higher funding allocation per capita, and that used scoring systems when commissioning projects (Consistency 0.9142, Coverage 0.7659).

When asked about the impact pathways for these interventions, stakeholders frequently highlighted how flexible funding could help move individuals through the employability pipeline where the support requirements were complex and required combinations of keyworker support with skills development.

Areas that utilised digital marketing to reach out to target populations and capitalised on opportunities for cross referrals, reported higher relative levels of outcome achievement. This emphasises two frequently held views from stakeholders:

- (1) that access to potential beneficiaries was influenced by an ability to reach out to individuals with complex needs, that might have been away from work for sustained periods of time and experience social isolation; and
- (2) that the needs of these target populations were often complex, requiring ecosystems that could work together to propel individuals into economic activity.

H8.2 Upskilling and qualification programmes improve career prospects and lead to progress towards employment (e.g. job interviews)

This hypothesis tested whether and the extent to which upskilling and qualification programmes improved career prospects and led to progress towards employment (including the intermediate steps of better applications, interviews and job search). The typical pathway combined short, accredited and job-relevant training with employability support and brokerage. Together, these were intended to result in the qualifications needed to compete for vacancies, secure interviews and interviews into jobs.

4.2.3 Summary of contribution assessments

In 15 of the 16 places where this hypothesis was tested the contribution claim was supported.

4.2.4 Mechanisms enabling progress to interviews and jobs

Rapid and sequenced support used keyworkers and front-line advisers to identify skills gaps and moved participants quickly into short, accredited training aligned to local labour market demand.

Links with employers strengthened training provision where delivery teams had strong employer relationships. Training was coupled with real opportunities through employer talks, site visits, guaranteed interview offers, and, in some cohorts, jobs conditional on passing courses and interviews. For younger cohorts, sector tasters, career insight and basic accreditations were used to build a bridge from education into first interviews and entry roles.

Wrap-around support helped tackle practical barriers to participation and interviews, with providers arranging training allowances, travel and clothing, and tailoring support for cohorts facing specific barriers, for example, digital exclusion, neurodiversity or criminal records.

Regional level coordination to improve access to training brought local authorities, particularly across Mayoral Strategic Authority areas, together to widened access to available course places and reduced waiting times. For some beneficiaries this sped up the move from assessment to training.

In-work upskilling including access to training for relevant licences and to refresher courses that supported career progression coupled with practical job-search skills helped beneficiaries translate new credentials into applications and interviews.

4.2.5 Impacts on career prospects and progress towards employment

Across places, the blend of accredited training, employability support and partnerships translated into new qualifications and skills, and resulted in clear movement along the pathway to work. Large programmes demonstrated a greater scale of qualifications achieved, job-search activity and

employment uptake. In South East Wales, monitoring data recorded more than 4,000 people supported to gain employment and nearly 2,900 in work following support. Around 3,900 reported increased employability through interpersonal skills and almost 3,000 reported greater familiarity with employer expectations. Survey evidence confirmed this, with the proportion of respondents in employment rising from 27% to 41% post-support, 85% reported better long-term job prospects, and among those who were previously unemployed, 30% moved into work; those who found jobs commonly credited UKSPF support as making a key contribution.

Smaller, more rural places also showed success. In East Riding of Yorkshire, 547 people gained qualifications or completed courses (target 435) and 518 achieved basic skills (target 260), with case material showing participants obtaining licences such as construction and food safety, updating functional skills, and using these to meet entry requirements, strengthen CVs and access apprenticeships.

Focusing on green and technical skills and upskilling linked to local sector pathways had positive outcomes. In the Highlands, an engineering-oriented programme for unemployed people supported 39 into work, with apprentices reported to be progressing well. On the other hand, some programmes reported strong skills gains but judged it too early or insufficiently evidenced to claim conversion to interviews or jobs. In North Wales, 3,719 beneficiaries reported improved employability through developing interpersonal skills and many gained or refreshed qualifications. Lack of follow up data, to determine how this translated into interviews or employment, meant the overall contribution to this specific outcome remained undetermined.

H8.3 Interventions increase individuals/beneficiaries' confidence in entering the labour market.

This hypothesis tested whether and the extent to which tailored employability support, skills training, volunteering and work-like activities supported individuals to develop confidence and interpersonal skills to enter the labour market. Confidence gains were expected to manifest as greater readiness to participate in courses, volunteering and community groups; improved CVs and interview performance; and a visible shift to active job-seeking.

4.2.6 Summary of contribution assessments

Most places that examined this outcome judged the contribution claim to be supported (16 out of 17). Evidence consistently showed that beneficiaries developed confidence and related soft skills which supported early labour-market engagement.

4.2.7 Mechanisms that built confidence in entering the labour market

One-to-one support and effective triage created a safe point of entry, beginning with barrier triage and an agreed plan based on participant need and strengths.

Volunteering and placements provided a low-risk setting to practise workplace behaviours including communication skills and teamwork. Tailored support for specific cohorts, (for example, neurodiverse residents, people with long-term health conditions, young people with limited experience, or migrants with low English) used specialist assessment and coaching, and made pragmatic adjustments to meet beneficiaries' needs.

4.2.8 Differences in mechanisms and effects across places

Where participants were furthest from work, person-centred support emphasised stabilisation and incremental gains. Intensive keyworker models in County Durham, Gateshead, Highlands and the West Midlands prioritised confidence and self-efficacy first, with staff accompanying beneficiaries to initial community sessions and volunteering opportunities, then broadening activity as confidence grew.

Where participants were closer to work, confidence was built through structured employability practice linked to real opportunities. In Richmond, confidence gains were tightly coupled to immediate next steps: same-day referrals to short courses, high-quality CV and interview preparation, and brokerage into live vacancies. In several places, specialist partners provided interview coaching and role-specific preparation, beneficiaries described the experience as the difference between feeling daunted by the idea of working and feeling “ready to get back into the swing of things.”

In places with larger geographies like South Yorkshire, the West Midlands and Glasgow City Region, larger numbers reported increased employability through interpersonal skills development. Delivery teams repeatedly noted that these soft-skill gains were the necessary first rung on the ladder to training, job search and employment for cohorts with multiple barriers.

4.2.9 Impact on confidence and early behaviour change

Across programmes, confidence was the first visible achievement. Participants who had been out of work for years described moving from isolation and anxiety to taking small, structured steps that rebuilt self-confidence. Delivery teams consistently reported these as early wins for beneficiaries that made the next step feel possible and, over time, normalised participation in learning and work-like settings.

This pattern was evident where wrap-around keyworker support was paired with gentle introductions to social and workplace routines. In one locality, staff accompanied residents with severe anxiety to their first community sessions; a few weeks later those same residents were volunteering weekly and, in at least one case, had progressed into a paid role. Elsewhere, participants used volunteering to rebuild routine and purpose: a beneficiary who taught digital basics to older adults reported better communication and confidence, then secured a hospital support job while continuing to pursue a role aligned to their qualifications.

Beneficiary accounts explained the causal pathway. Individuals who had felt overwhelmed by the idea of working described personalised support as the difference between dread and readiness: “I’m more confident... I can go in the interview and I say yes, I can do it.” Others linked confidence to practical accreditations and work-like exposure. Participants in entry-level engineering and construction programmes achieved certificates and progressed to guaranteed interviews, with employers citing development of confidence and workplace behaviours alongside technical skills.

This qualitative evidence was mirrored in monitoring data on confidence-related outcomes.

H8.4 Employability support leads to increased job searches among beneficiaries/in the local area.

This hypothesis tested if tailored employability support led more people to start and sustain job searches. The expected pathway was that, once initial barriers were addressed and people felt prepared, advisers would phase support into active job searching using vacancy alerts, hands-on help with applications and introductions to suitable employers.

4.2.10 Contribution assessments across places

All eight places that examined this outcome concluded that the contribution claim was supported.

4.2.11 Mechanisms leading to increased job searches

Sequenced and timely support started with keyworkers conducting triage, identifying barriers and building confidence through practical support. They then moved participants into job-search activity, including help with CVs and personal statements, rehearsed interviews, basic IT skills. For those furthest from work, short, job-relevant courses, volunteering, or basic digital skills came first, job search followed once confidence and capability had improved.

Frequent, low-intensity contact including online sessions, short tasks, job bulletins and check-ins kept individuals engaged, while practical support such as travel costs or interview clothing, removed immediate barriers to job search activity.

4.2.12 Impact on job-search activity

Supporting individuals to become job-ready resulted in job-search engagement. In Gateshead 106 participants engaging in job search after support, nearly double the target of 55. Beneficiaries reported they now knew “the best websites to look at” and had improved CVs. In Tamworth, 196 people were supported to engage in job searches (target of 100), with 192 individuals continuing their job search independently after support.

Glasgow City Region reported 2,805 people job-searching (target 1,728). Participants benefited from practical support: a survey of beneficiaries in East and West Dunbartonshire found that more than half of the 221 respondents had accessed help with their CV and around a third took up interview preparation support. Qualitative evidence indicated many credited their confidence to apply for jobs to the support they received from trusted advisers.

The West Midlands recorded 3,091 people engaged in job searching against a target of 1,270, with front-line staff and beneficiaries reporting that a range of support (coaching, job clubs, volunteering and short courses) helped rebuild capability and motivation.

In Richmond, job-search engagement exceeded target (42 against 22), aligning with case study evidence of beneficiaries moving from very limited activity to regular applications and interviews following structured onboarding, targeted short courses and rapid brokerage.

4.2.13 Contextual and process conditions supporting job searches

The Qualitative Comparative Analysis identified one particular combination of conditions that led to increased numbers of people engaging in job searches following UKSPF-funded support. Where areas had a higher funding allocation per capita, combined with more use of existing delivery partners, and use of cross referrals, they were more likely to report higher proportions of beneficiaries engaging in job searches. (Consistency 1.0, Coverage 0.5918)

As with overall employability, (and whilst not a surprising finding) stakeholders noted that higher funding levels improved their ability to provide holistic support for individuals with complex needs and support them towards job search engagement. Similarly, cross referral between UKSPF interventions seems to enhance the effectiveness of the support, by expanding the pool of services that beneficiaries accessed.

In addition, the QCA on job searches specifically highlights the use of existing delivery partners to enhance outcome realisation. This reinforces the process evaluation finding that commissioning trusted partners who understand the local area and the employability challenges of their target populations was a key factor in successfully moving individuals towards employment. Areas that partnered with known delivery organisations benefited from their existing networks, their experience and skills, and their ability to deploy quickly and effectively.

4.3 Increased skills

H9.1 Interventions help individuals/beneficiaries gain a life/soft skill.

Case study evaluations explored whether tailored support helped beneficiaries develop life and soft skills, such as confidence, communication, teamwork, independence and employability behaviours, with some interventions also enabling them to gain basic skills and qualifications. The expected pathway was that, once initial barriers were addressed and beneficiaries felt more capable, they would practise interpersonal skills in safe settings, build basic capabilities (including digital), and progress to further training, job search or sustained participation in community activity.

4.3.1 Contribution assessments across places

For most places where this outcome was examined the contribution claim was supported (16 out of 17).

4.3.2 Mechanisms enabling the development of life/soft skills

Support worked by pairing personalised, trusted relationships with practical, repeated opportunities to practise interpersonal behaviours.

One-to-one barrier triage and confidence building keyworkers and mentors began with barrier triage and confidence-building, using regular one-to-one contact to set personal goals and agree small steps.

Group-based activities provided a safe environment to rehearse communication, teamwork and social interaction.

Volunteering placements and sustained involvement in local groups provided practical opportunities to strengthen soft skills, reduce social isolation and rebuild self-belief.

Practical employability support included advisers supporting beneficiaries with CVs, interview practice and workplace behaviours.

Combination with health and social care offers such as close links to primary care, social prescribing and mainstream services helped address mental health and stability as prerequisites to

skills development. Regular contact and supported introductions to appropriate groups and services were common features.

Digital inclusion support including community-based coaching and device access enabled beneficiaries to manage online appointments and banking, complete forms, reconnect with family and engage with training. In some places, this was described as vital to reduce isolation and enable progression, especially in rural settings.

Accredited learning such as short, sector-relevant courses and licence attainment built capability and gave tangible milestones, which beneficiaries often described as reinforcing confidence and employability behaviours.

4.3.3 Differences in mechanisms and impact on life/soft skills across places

In places where cohorts were commonly described as economically inactive and facing multiple barriers (mental health conditions, long absences from work, social anxiety, neurodiversity) the model often began with confidence and stability before any formal skills or employability activity.

A range of types of place including Gateshead, East Riding of Yorkshire, North East Lincolnshire, North Wales, Highlands and the Glasgow City Region all described early, gentle one-to-one engagement to tackle anxiety, isolation and low self-belief, followed by supported introductions to small groups and local activities. In Gateshead this included close links to primary care and social prescribing.

Rurality, poor transport links, and digital exclusion were often the rationale for focusing on digital skills and digital inclusion. This was a priority in Mid Wales, Tamworth, Southend-on-Sea and Uttlesford. Mid Wales delivered large-scale workshops, drop-ins and equipment access, with more than 9,000 individuals receiving digital skills support and completing a course or qualification and 3,200 supported to engage in life skills. Qualitative accounts described practical achievements such as attending online GP appointments, online banking and job interviews. Tamworth emphasised essential IT training (including digital CVs) as part of removing a key barrier to employability. Southend-on-Sea combined employability mentoring with basic digital, English and maths provision (including ESOL).

Other places used accredited learning and sector-relevant training as the core of their model. South Hams delivered training courses under the Regenerative Farming project to 83 individuals to support the adoption of new to firm technologies or processes. Chesterfield focused on strands aligned with local sectors (digital, care, manufacturing) and met targets for upskilling and qualifications.

In large geographical areas with established support ecosystems, programmes commonly scaled up existing activities and strengthened cross-intervention referrals. In South East Wales and North Wales, keyworkers delivered support at scale through barrier triage and short courses. South East Wales supported 15,299 individuals to engage in life skills and basic skills activities, with survey results showing 58% of 114 respondents had learned new skills. North Wales also reported that 8,945 people had engaged in life-skills activities and 5,734 people had experienced reduced structural barriers to employment and skills opportunities following support, with case studies highlighting the effectiveness of individualised plans and mentoring.

Where accredited routes were used to support the development of soft and life skills, places reported strong progress. South Yorkshire exceeded targets for people supported to access basic skills (2,961), supported to participate in education (2,491), in education or training following support (2,220) and receiving support to gain a vocational licence (1,791).

H9.2 Interventions help individuals/beneficiaries gain a qualification.

This hypothesis examined whether UKSPF-funded support would enable beneficiaries to gain recognised qualifications (including vocational licences and basic skills), either through direct delivery of accredited training or by signposting participants to other providers.

4.3.4 Contribution assessments across places

Contribution was assessed as supported in all 14 places where this was tested.

4.3.5 Mechanisms enabling attainment of new qualifications

Preparatory support for those furthest from the labour market sequenced accredited learning with early confidence-building steps. Taster sessions helped spark and interest in vocational pathways, followed by group-based confidence building and basic skills. Once beneficiaries were ready they moved onto formal courses.

Employee demand alignment focused on delivering or funding qualifications and licences that aligned with local employers' priorities, with a clear emphasis on sectors most important to the local economy.

Combining digital skills development with online courses supported digital-inclusion by building basic digital literacy skills along with opportunities to complete accredited learning.

4.3.6 Differences in mechanisms and effects across places

Programmes commonly aligned with local employer needs and sector-specific routes, providing courses or funds to achieve sector-relevant qualifications and licences. Provision aligned to manufacturing, care and digital roles in Chesterfield and green skills in North of Tyne, where 180 people retrained and 232 gained a qualification or completed a course following support. This model produced immediate, recognised credentials that beneficiaries and employers valued.

One specific sector of interest across many places was the green skills economy. In the Highlands, UKSPF funded dedicated facilities that delivered heat-pump and other accredited training, leaving a training legacy beyond the funding period. North of Tyne combined taster sessions, green skills training and safety qualifications for renewables, with evidence of participants moving from exploration into formal courses. In the City of Edinburgh, partners noted green-skills achievement lagging against ambitious targets, reflecting the challenge of building capacity quickly in this sector.

Applied learning was funded to support disadvantaged cohorts through accredited courses. Watford paired practical experience with accreditation so that disadvantaged participants, especially those with little prior attainment, could achieve formal certificates and use them to progress to volunteering, employment or further education.

4.3.7 Impact on qualification attainment

Across places, management information and qualitative accounts point to substantial volumes of qualification gains through UKSPF funded interventions. However, time-lag effects were common, several places noted that many learners completed their awards after the monitoring cut-off, resulting in under-reporting of “qualifications achieved” despite strong pipelines.

Successful delivery of qualifications include Edinburgh where 2,934 people were supported to gain a qualification (101% of target), 358 gained qualifications/licences/skills (130% of target), and 25 were supported to gain a vocational licence (63% of target), with providers crediting strengthened delivery partnerships and large-scale delivery for reaching target groups.

In North of Tyne: 232 people were supported to gain a qualification (219% of target), with 180 reporting support to retrain (600% of target). Qualitative evidence was provided of progression from tasters into formal vocational courses. And in the Highlands 266 people were supported to gain a qualification (196% of target) and 45 were supported to gain a vocational licence in green skills (90% of target).

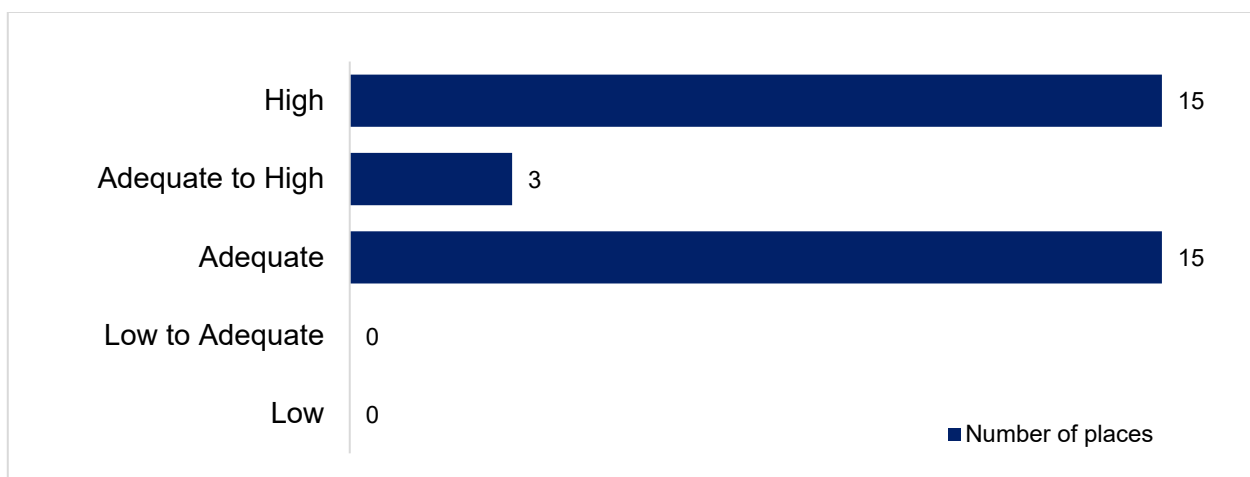
5. Value for Money Evaluation

This section evaluates the value for money of UKSPF interventions, drawing on findings from the Value for Money (VfM) assessments carried out in each place. The assessments used the National Audit Office's (NAO) 4E's framework to examine the economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity of the programme.

5.1 Economy

Around half of the case study places were assessed to have a high rating for economy (the ability to purchase goods and services at an appropriate price), with the remainder assessed as adequate, see figure 5.1. This indicates that most case study places were able to procure goods and services at the expected level or better.

Figure 5.1: Economy ratings across place evaluations



5.1.1 Factors which contributed to economy in delivery

Broad and well-publicised open calls and clear communication that generated strong supplier pipelines

Many authorities ran open calls and publicised them widely, which consistently translated into high volumes of bids and strong competition. The City of Edinburgh Council adopted an open grants process and widely signposted it via a prospectus, a recorded online launch meeting and the council website; interview evidence indicates broad awareness and “the total value of all tenders submitted was double Edinburgh’s UKSPF allocation,” demonstrating competitive tension and allowing the council to prioritise higher-value proposals. Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly undertook proactive market engagement, encouraging a diverse supplier base; stakeholders reported c.1,500 expressions of interest and 487 bids across 42 funding calls, with 98 organisations ultimately contracted and the portfolio well spread across suppliers. Southend-on-Sea ran multiple open calls with strong outreach through the Southend Association of Voluntary Services. Calls were oversubscribed. North East Lincolnshire reported a “high response” to open calls “from a wide range of organisations... not just the usual organisations,” and funded around 95 intervention projects, confirming both breadth and depth of supplier interest. These practices created

competitive pipelines that enabled selection on quality and value, drove down risks of single-bidder awards, and improved assurance around supplier capacity.

Use of established procurement frameworks and portals opened access to wide supplier pools

Authorities that procured through existing frameworks or central portals accessed large, pre-qualified supplier markets. For example, in North of Tyne, the Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) for business support and the Adult Skills Framework included over 100 suppliers, providing breadth and flexibility. County Durham published open calls on the UK Government's Find a Tender service, with stakeholders reporting "significant interest." Chesterfield publicised funding calls via its procurement portal, reported no procurement challenges and expressed "particular satisfaction with the level of interest."

Multiple procurement routes broadened participation among different types and sizes of providers

Several places used a mix of routes, including open grant calls, competitive tenders, challenge funds, mini-tenders, and direct procurement, tailored to intervention size and required speed of delivery. The Highlands combined open grants and challenge funds with mini-tenders and direct procurement, with external partners praising the responsiveness of the UKSPF team and the clarity of processes. Mid Wales commissioned 180 projects "predominantly through competitive open call processes" and also used "umbrella schemes and partnerships" (for example, via the Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations, or PAVO) to extend awareness and lower the hurdle for smaller organisations. A diversified procurement toolkit helped engage both larger suppliers and smaller voluntary organisations, increasing overall supplier volumes and choice where appropriate.

Several authorities highlighted the use of trusted providers with established delivery histories to safeguard quality where fully open competition was not feasible. North East Derbyshire awarded contracts to "well-established organisations... with proven records of delivery and prior experience working with the Council".

Clear, structured selection processes with predefined criteria

Across many places, competitive processes were designed and run against predefined criteria that explicitly included quality and value for money. Several places also embedded multi-stage checks and independent oversight in the route to award. For example, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly's Good Growth Programme required detailed applications and applied a "multi-stage appraisal" including gateway checks, technical peer review, finance due diligence and final member sign-off by the Economic Prosperity Board. In North of Tyne, commissioning followed the Green Book appraisal process; for People and Skills, a five-stage assessment was undertaken by an independent panel of stakeholders from funding organisations. However, this level of oversight was only appropriate for larger contract awards.

Pooling and collaboration across authorities increased visibility and market interest

Pooling resources and issuing joint procurements with other local authorities increased budgets to a scale that attracted strong supplier interest. For example, Watford pooled around a third of its allocation with eight other Hertfordshire districts to commission county-wide business support and

skills services. This “achieved economies of scale” and was delivered through “experienced delivery providers.” In South East Wales a regional model combined internal delivery with open calls in each local authority, which enabled broader supplier engagement across the programme’s footprint.

Wyre reported that “other local authorities also in receipt of UKSPF funding had intensified competition for potential intervention providers.” In this case, pooling resources with other local authorities may have mitigated competition between local authorities to find suppliers and improved value for money.

Legacy of previous programmes provided a ready pool of qualified providers

Several places noted that suppliers transitioned from ERDF/ESF or other prior programmes, sustaining market readiness. South Yorkshire’s open tenders attracted “many delivery partners who had delivered projects under European funding”. Where authorities used in-house teams or incumbent delivery partners, they reported faster mobilisation and fewer set-up costs under short timelines. Blaby noted that “most delivery providers... had experienced staff ready to be deployed for project delivery or... had established relationship with the Council through the delivery of prior projects which reduced sunk costs on set up time.” Hastings adopted a “co-commissioning” approach with trusted local providers “to expedite things” under compressed mobilisation periods.

High-quality monitoring and assurance processes

Several places coupled contracting with systematic monitoring to assure delivery quality. Chesterfield formalised delivery through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), required regular updates, held quarterly meetings (increasing in frequency toward project end), monitored outputs, and reviewed continuation where delivery underperformed. This was a fairly common approach across places. North Ayrshire reported monthly performance monitoring and emphasised the role of flexible third sector providers in maintaining VfM under changing conditions.

5.1.2 Barriers and challenges that constrained economic delivery

Compressed timescales

A recurrent challenge was the compressed timetable from national approval to local award. All places cited this challenge to some extent, regardless of specific place or delivery model characteristics. For example, the Highlands evaluation noted a “relatively tight timeframe,” with only 12% spend in 2022/23. To respond to the challenge, they implemented procurement using mini-tenders to speed up delivery.

A number of places increased internal delivery or used direct commissioning of known partners to meet delivery deadlines, which reduced opportunities for new suppliers to engage. Liverpool City Region delivered “most” activity in-house or through incumbents, with only two call-offs run across the programme. Many places recorded heavy back-loading of activity into the final year, partly also due to People and Skills interventions only being approved by MHCLG for after year 2. Hastings spent “nearly 90% of the budget” in the last year, with several activities slipping into 2024 and 2025. The Highlands saw 71% of spend in 2024/25. While most such programmes achieved full or

near-full spend by March 2025, the concentration of delivery timelines increased pressure on suppliers and on in-year budget management.

The choice for some places to increase internal delivery as a result was pragmatic due to compressed timelines and continuity needs, however, this reduced opportunities for wider market testing. The limited use of open competition reduced the ability to demonstrate that the award processes had identified the best quality-cost balance available in the market, even though delivery quality was satisfactory.

Guidance changes

Local authorities reported that late or evolving guidance created timing and value for money risks. South East Wales noted “late programme setup” and “unclear guidance” at the outset, which meant reprofiling was required after “being told that actually we’d understood [targets] incorrectly,” consumed time and delayed service launch. Watford reported “unclear initial guidance,” with delivery providers under pressure to understand local needs rapidly. Redbridge recorded that outcomes and outputs were “not finalised until a year into the funding period,” straining design and planning.

Niche requirements, small contract values or specialist skills narrowed the eligible supplier pool

Where specifications required specialist expertise or budgets were limited, local authorities recorded fewer bids, which potentially reduced value for money. In Blaby, business support specifications had “niche requirements and skills expectations” and “limited funding,” reducing the pool of eligible local suppliers. Wyre reported that some Communities and Place activities received a “single application... given the specialist services required and the contractors’ existing involvement.”

Rurality, geography and market limitations limited suppliers in some places

Rural locations meant some challenges with accessing enough of the right suppliers. In the Highlands, the supplier base was very narrow due to specialised service areas or remote localities, with “only two quality bids in at least one case,” reported. The high cost of delivering in rural areas deterred some potential suppliers and “contractor availability in certain remote areas was limited.” East Riding of Yorkshire emphasised “utilising the local supplier base... to retain spending in the local economy”, which the evaluation notes “may have meant that the local authority did not benefit from lower prices associated with economies of scale” and “greater reliance upon a smaller/local suppliers may have reduced competition.”

External delays – planning

External factors within the wider planning system also impacted upon local authorities’ ability to deliver. North East Lincolnshire cancelled a large capital project in Year 3 due to planning issues; reprofiling funds to other priorities. In Edinburgh, capital projects encountered “longer-than-expected planning approvals, land-ownership issues (active travel) ... and weather-related construction downtime,” delaying starts and providing challenges to economical

delivery. Wyre’s Communities and Place interventions faced timing challenges due to dependency on Lancashire County Council decisions relating to land ownership and planning permissions.

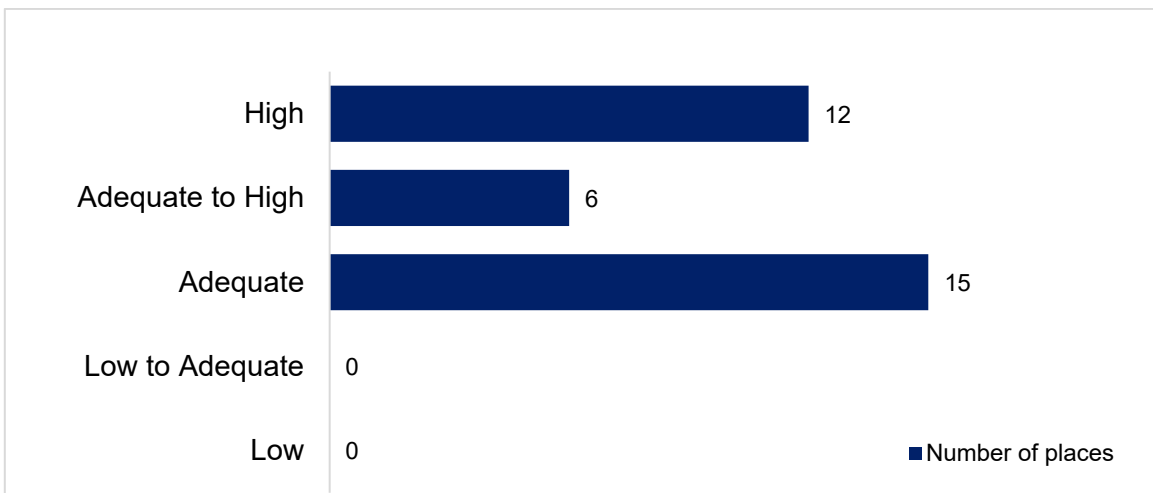
Governance chains and approval processes

In devolved models (e.g. regional partnerships or Mayoral Strategic Authorities), additional governance steps increased the elapsed time between national decisions and local delivery. Within WMCA, stakeholders acknowledged that “necessary local approval mechanisms created a time lag between MHCLG allocating funding and funding been available to delivery partners,” although this was also noted as vital in ensuring funds reached appropriate local organisations. In North Wales, multi-LA projects had to follow each local authority’s assessment process, with “some slight variation in process and time taken to reach a funding decision.” These governance layers, while important for assurance, compressed the remaining delivery window and required stronger in-year management to deliver the budget.

5.2 Efficiency

Just over a third of the case study places were assessed to have a high rating for efficiency (the ability to achieve outputs at the lowest possible cost), with around half assessed as adequate, see figure 5.2. This indicates that most case study places were able to achieve outputs at the required cost.

Figure 5.2: Efficiency ratings across place evaluations



5.2.1 Factors which contributed to efficiency in delivery

Several factors which supported local authorities to achieve outputs at an appropriate cost have already been discussed in section 5.1, including building on a legacy of existing provision and experienced delivery capacity, and collaboration across authorities to deliver at scale. Additional factors that supported efficiency are set out below

Proactive, flexible budget management directed funds to the most delivery-ready activity

To achieve efficiency, active in-year management of budgets was a consistent feature to ensure programmes safeguarded outcome delivery despite compressed timetables. The City of Edinburgh Council redeployed a Year 1 Multiply underspend to commission ten additional People and Skills

interventions and later reallocated £800,529 across all three priorities, predominantly to capital projects, to minimise underspend and keep resources aligned to areas of higher demand. In North Wales, monthly progress monitoring coupled with a dynamic forecasting model allowed budgets and targets to be adjusted responsively, the programme reached 98% of its total allocation and reported strong outcomes in multiple areas. South East Wales reallocated Multiply underspends moved to People and Skills projects, some funding also moved from People and Skills into the other two investment priorities where outcome generation was stronger. The practical effect of these measures was to maintain the scale of outcome delivery within the funding window by concentrating resources on deliverable, higher-yield activity.

Creative intervention design choices

Several programmes documented creative practical design choices that increased output achievement within the resource envelope. In Edinburgh, Business Gateway Plus, a business support team created within Edinburgh Council to deliver some interventions, introduced a lower-value start-up grant to increase the number of beneficiaries and created an outreach adviser role to engage under-represented entrepreneurs. Monitoring data indicated strong reach to target demographics: of the 481 Business Gateway beneficiaries 56% were women, 49% from an ethnic minority background and 7% reported a disability. In the Highlands, the Renewable Energy Training Hub was established with UKSPF funding, and the college delivering the Hub required every engineering apprentice to undertake the new heat pump module. This meant that outputs surpassed their initial target and 108 people gained a qualification, crucially, embedding a pipeline of outputs and outcomes beyond the funded period. In Watford, the provision of shared market infrastructure (for example, gazebos and insurance) reduced barriers for start-ups and micro-businesses to participate in enterprise initiatives, enabling large numbers of traders to benefit within the same budget.

Small-grant and “Key Fund” models broadened participation and multiplied outcome-bearing activity

Small scale, community level funds expanded the range and number of interventions which could be delivered. In North Wales, the Key Funds mechanism was heavily oversubscribed across multiple rounds, with local authorities re-directing additional resource into oversubscribed funds to meet demand, this spread small-scale activity across many communities and organisations.. Maidstone’s creative community grants were “consistently oversubscribed,” with applications increasing each year, providing a wide base of cultural and engagement activity which supported outcomes including increased footfall and volunteering numbers.

Starting at risk or staging starts avoided early slippage on timelines

In North Wales, some council-led projects began “at risk” ahead of formal grant offer letters to avoid slippage, preserving more of the delivery window for participants to progress through support and achieve outcomes. In Edinburgh, while most providers waited until receipt of funds to recruit, the option to start earlier allowed some projects to begin engagement and delivery within the first quarter of the programme.

Combining UKSPF with other funding streams amplified the volume of outputs delivered

Where UKSPF was combined with other resources, programmes reported greater scale and successful continuity of outcomes.

Deliberate alignment with complementary national and local programmes helped increase the scale and reach of outputs. Where UKSPF sat alongside existing investment, places reporting delivering more activity than UKSPF alone could support. For example, County Durham aligned UKSPF with the Future High Streets Fund, the Towns Fund and the local Towns and Villages Fund. Interviewees described how UKSPF “was used to enhance and expand existing local authority programmes”, enabling larger-scale regeneration, business grants, job creation and environmental improvements. In North of Tyne, UKSPF supported delivery of local regeneration masterplans, with match funding drawn from the NTCA Investment Fund, the Towns Fund, local authority contributions and private sector contributions. In the West Midlands Combined Authority area, UKSPF activity was combined purposefully with other public funds to create progression “pathways”. For example, UKSPF was used to engage economically inactive residents, then the Adult Skills Fund funded education and training, and subsequently employment opportunities were provided via the Commonwealth Games Legacy Enhancement Fund. In Torridge, the Pannier Market Feasibility Study secured £1.49m from the Government’s Community Regeneration Partnership, and the Angel Investor Network attracted an additional £326,000 investment, complementing UKSPF to support more firms and activities.

Local authority contributions and internal budgets also played an important role in increasing outputs. Direct financial contributions from local authorities supplemented UKSPF widened the scope for delivery. In Adur Section 106 funds, Community Infrastructure Levies, pooled business rates and council revenue were combined to widen scope. For one project 75% of costs came from UKSPF, 17% from pooled business rates and 8% from other source. Project leads reported that the programme would have had a smaller scope and reach without this additional funding. Chesterfield used the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) scheme to invest around £90,000 alongside UKSPF community projects.

Grant design that required or leveraged match funding also helped increase delivery. In East Riding of Yorkshire, business grants were available for 50% of eligible expenditure, increasing the total investment per project. North East Derbyshire designed its Shopfront Enhancement Scheme to cover up to 75% of works, with businesses contributing the remaining 25%.

Some places reported that, even where funds were not formally combined **synergies and alignment were achieved without formal match funding**. Some places designed UKSPF activity to complement existing services and programmes, creating synergies that increased engagement and participation. In Hastings projects aligned with health services and other initiatives, including co-location with NHS recovery hubs and coordination with the Social Supermarket and Citizens Advice Bureau, which supported increased engagement and participation in UKSPF-funded activities.

5.2.2 Barriers and challenges that constrained efficient delivery

Several barriers and challenges limited how efficiently case study places could deliver projects. Some of these are discussed in Section 5.1, including:

- Compressed national timetables left reduced time for outputs to be delivered;

- Planning consents and material lead-times reduced the time available to achieve outputs (in the context of capital projects);
- Governance and approval processes added elapsed time before activity could start (particularly for devolved models).

Additional barriers and challenges are detailed below.

Recruitment and staffing constraints

Linked to the delays and as a result of the fixed term funding, many local authorities reported that they had difficulty recruiting and retaining key staff to deliver interventions and manage their UKSPF programme. Blaby reported recruitment challenges linked to short contract duration, which, combined with the time taken to complete bidding and contracting, meant that they had less time to build trust and promote the services. Watford described a “cliff edge” effect at programme end, which risked service continuity. Whilst these are common challenges faced by local authorities delivering fixed term government programmes, these constraints nonetheless were reported to slow engagement and progression of delivery, limiting output and outcome volumes within the programme.

Capacity constraints in smaller authorities

Capacity constraints in smaller LA teams were reported to slow procurement, contracting and monitoring cycles under compressed timelines, heightening schedule risk. Newcastle-under-Lyme highlighted “the lack of capacity within a small local authority” and therefore commissioned consultants to deliver a large suite of projects through the UKSPF. This enabled progress but came at a higher cost to the LA.

Policy and eligibility constraints that limited match funding

In several places, spending rules or funder policies limited the ability to combine UKSPF with other funding sources, thus limiting the ability to achieve outputs efficiently. In Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, the Good Growth Programme did not combine UKSPF with other funding, with internal stakeholders suggesting that UKSPF should be “used for its own outputs to push the value of the public purse further.” In North Wales, local authorities reported that Welsh Government’s preference was generally not to use its funds (for example, Transforming Towns Fund) as match to UKSPF, with decisions taken case by case. Stakeholders noted this added a layer of uncertainty, making it more difficult to combine funding streams effectively and limiting the potential for strategic alignment between programmes.

Limited or uneven evidence of combination of funding across programmes

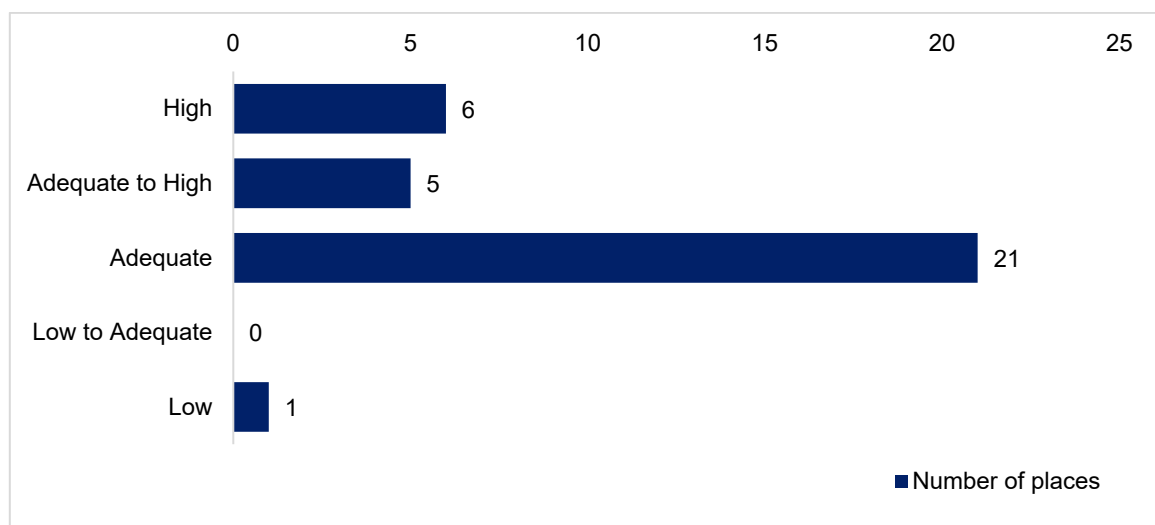
In some places the evidence shows limited use of additional funds alongside UKSPF. Liverpool City Region reported “some good, selective use of additional funding,” but “this was not systematic,” and UKSPF was generally the main source for most interventions. Southend-on-Sea did “not formally combine UKSPF with other funding sources,” although council officers noted that UKSPF management costs required internal funding, and delivery partners invested in-kind resources and staff capacity. In South Hams, there was “no evidence of projects drawing on match

funding,” though several projects aligned with the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) which provided finance to implement plans and priorities identified through UKSPF. Central UKSPF guidance encouraged matched funding to be considered but did not provide structured guidance about how to achieve this. Further guidance may have provided greater leverage in places to coordinate funding and achieve a higher number of outputs.

5.3 Effectiveness

Around a fifth of the case study places were assessed to have a high rating for effectiveness (the ability to achieve outcomes at the lowest possible cost), with around half assessed as adequate, see figure 5.3. This indicates that most case study places were able to achieve outcomes at the required cost.

Figure 5.3: Effectiveness ratings across place evaluations



5.3.1 Factors which contributed to effective delivery

Several factors helped case study places achieve outcomes at an appropriate cost, Some of these have already been discussed in Sections 5.1 and 5.2 including:

- Proactive, flexible budget management;
- Combining UKSPF with other funds;
- Building on existing provision and experienced capacity;
- Creative intervention design including small-grant models;
- Starting interventions at risk.

One further factor that supported effectiveness in delivery is set out below.

Embedding services within trusted local settings to improve reach and relevance

Embedding delivery within trusted institutions lowered access barriers and drove outcomes aligned to need. In Edinburgh, advice services were placed within NHS recovery hubs and schools. This model was reported as fostering trust and strong referral pathways, enabling outcomes such as increased engagement of people with complex needs. Hastings' neighbourhood-level approach located engagement and learning in the refurbished community centre and aligned activity with health-related initiatives. This resulted in increased participation in skills and community activities among residents who might not normally engage.

5.3.2 Barriers and challenges that constrained effective delivery

Some of the barriers and challenges which hindered local authorities being able to deliver projects and outcomes effectively are discussed in Sections 5.1 and 5.2, including:

- Compressed national timelines, shortening the period for outcomes to materialise;
- Delays due to planning consents, external factors (e.g. weather) and material lead-times;
- Governance and approval processes added time before interventions could start.

Additional barriers and challenges are detailed below.

Recruitment and staffing constraints reduced throughput into outcomes

As discussed in Section 5.2, recruitment, retention and staffing issues presented a challenge to achieving outputs, and consequently outcomes. Additionally, staff shortages presented a further challenge for places - collecting follow up outcome data from beneficiaries was not possible where delivery had ceased as there were no staff available to conduct this.

Some outcomes would, by their nature, materialise beyond the UKSPF window

Several local authorities noted that outcomes around business productivity and increased turnover would take longer than the programme period to emerge. Chesterfield stated that while immediate outcomes around new processes and products had been achieved, outcomes such as increased productivity and turnover were "expected to be achieved in the coming years." Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly reported that only a small proportion of funded interventions had met their outcome targets by the time of the evaluation, with many more due to be reported up to 2030, and stakeholders expected more outcomes to be achieved beyond the programme.

Gaps in reach and uneven engagement with certain groups and places

In a number of places, specific cohorts were harder to reach or less well served, constraining outcomes in relation to needs. Edinburgh's providers reported difficulties engaging the "hardest-to-reach youth," uneven uptake among some demographics, and lower engagement in some high-need areas despite overall success. In South West Wales, consultees noted gaps in engaging employers in co-designed provision, limiting outcomes linked to progression and job creation in some places.

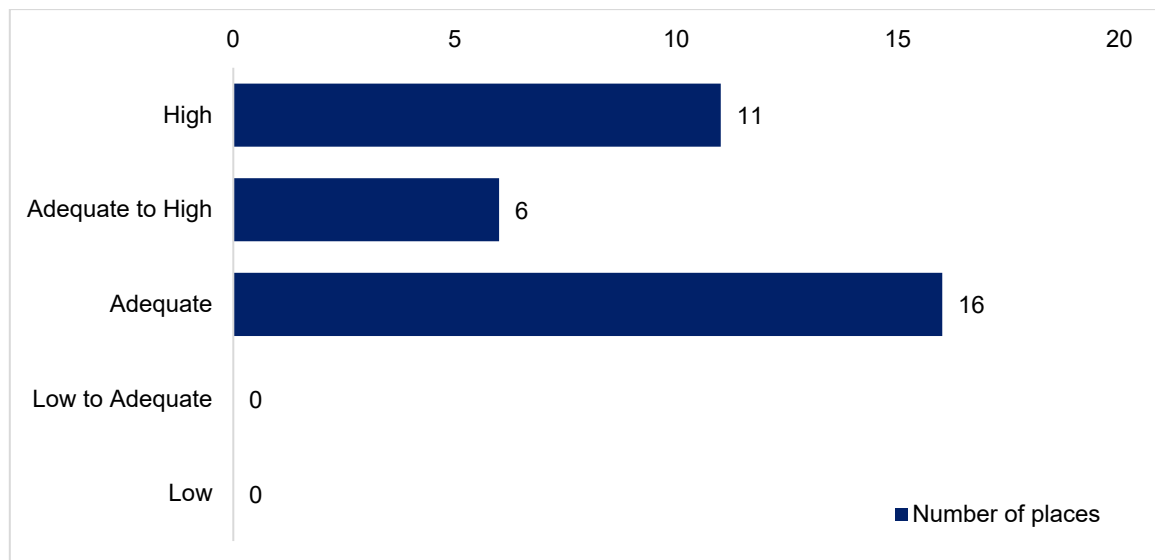
Perceptions of scale and impact relative to needs

In Liverpool City Region, while stakeholders welcomed the flexibility to align UKSPF with strategic priorities and pivot activity in response to local needs, some felt that certain Communities and Place activities, such as small-scale tree planting, were seen as low impact compared with the scale of local need. North Ayrshire noted that, although outcomes aligned with regional needs around skills and employability and support for SMEs, “the scale of the funding and outcomes achieved was unlikely to be sufficient to have a transformational effect.” Mid Wales stakeholders reflected that while interventions aligned strongly with rural needs, the breadth of projects may have limited the scale of impacts that could be created within the period.

5.4 Equity

A third of the case study places were assessed to have a high rating for equity (how fairly the outcomes have been distributed), with around half assessed as adequate, see figure 5.4. This indicates that the majority of local authorities were able to achieve outcomes among their anticipated target groups, albeit at an adequate level only.

Figure 5.4: Equity ratings across place evaluations



5.4.1 Factors which contributed to equitable delivery

Several factors supported case study areas in achieving a fair distribution of outcomes. Some of these overlap with the factors discussed in sections 5.1 to 5.3. This section highlights factors that specifically supported equity.

Alignment with local strategies

Delivery reached the intended groups where target beneficiaries were clearly identified in investment plans and strategies were grounded in local evidence. County Durham used extensive consultation and co-production against its Inclusive Economic Strategy, with a strong focus on left-behind neighbourhoods, SMEs and people with complex barriers to economic participation. East Riding of Yorkshire set out target beneficiaries for each investment priority, rural and isolated communities and vulnerable groups under Communities and Place, SMEs and key sectors under

Supporting Local Business, and unemployed/economically inactive and marginalised groups under People and Skills. Stakeholders confirmed that delivery reflected these priorities.

Where investment plans articulated target groups with clarity, delivery partners had a strong mandate to focus effort on the right beneficiaries. Gateshead's plan focused on the highly specific groups in the investment plan - a postcode analysis confirmed concentration of provision in wards with the most deprived LSOAs.

Open calls and community grant schemes widened participation for grassroots and underserved groups

As discussed in Section 5.2, open calls and small-grant mechanisms consistently broadened the delivery base and enabled grassroots organisations to reach target groups. By opening access to delivery funding at a smaller scale, authorities enabled a high volume of local projects to engage beneficiaries. This included community organisations working with vulnerable residents, in ways that aligned with local priorities.

Embedding services in trusted settings and co-location with mainstream provision

As discussed in Section 5.3, interventions were more likely to reach intended beneficiaries where services were delivered through trusted local settings. The observed effect was improved engagement among target groups, particularly those furthest from mainstream provision.

Partnerships with VCSE organisations and person-centred delivery

Working with VCSE organisations and adopting person-centred approaches helped reach priority beneficiaries. During commissioning, County Durham encouraged partnerships that included VCSE organisations in delivery to reach left-behind communities. South Yorkshire embedded "community connectedness" within procurement and highlighted delivery by community-focused organisations as a particular success in engaging historically less-engaged groups. Impact was qualitatively reported as achieving greater reach to target beneficiaries, particularly those with multiple barriers, and delivery that better matched the needs of individuals and communities.

Continuity of proven provision

Several places used UKSPF to sustain services with established reach into target groups, preventing gaps in provision. In Edinburgh, UKSPF was seen as a "lifeline" that preserved proven services such as Advice in Schools and mental health and recovery hubs, and extended them to new locations, supporting continued engagement of vulnerable residents. Blaby continued locally delivered mental health support previously funded by the county's COVID resilience fund and expanded it to primary schools.

5.4.2 Barriers and challenges that constrained equitable delivery

Some of the barriers and challenges that limited equitable delivery are already discussed in Sections 5.1 to 5.3. This section brings these together and sets out all barriers affecting equity.

Compressed timescales reducing the scope to engage and target effectively in Year 1

As discussed in Section 5.1, the timescales for design and delivery were challenging, which may have led to early intervention design (and selection of outputs and outcomes) not being targeted at the correct groups.

Underrepresented sub-groups and uneven engagement in some high-need places

Several authorities reported specific cohorts being harder to engage, despite overall success in reaching target groups. Edinburgh providers found it difficult to engage marginalised young people, noting uneven uptake among some demographics. Richmond reported that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people and young people aged 18-29 were particularly challenging to reach; council interviews highlighted this as an issue. These gaps meant that, in pockets, intended beneficiaries were under-represented relative to initial plans, requiring ongoing adjustments to reach those groups.

Rurality, geography and local capacity affecting reach

As discussed in Section 5.2, the rurality and location of some places affected the ability to deliver interventions and reach target groups. In rural and remote areas, geography and limited organisational capacity constrained reach. For example, the Highlands reported that workers from small and micro-enterprises were under-represented in green skills training, as attending longer modules disrupted business operations. However, recruitment was easier around urban Inverness than in remote areas. North East Derbyshire's distribution of community improvement grants depended on the capacity of parish and town councils to produce applications, leading to some communities benefiting more than others.

Tensions between regional or pan-programme priorities and local specificity

In Liverpool City Region, stakeholders welcomed the flexibility to align UKSPF with city region priorities but also reported that the pre-determined intervention types set by central government constrained local authorities' ability to focus as specifically on their own local needs as they might have wished. Some interviewees felt that greater public consultation and better targeting could have improved alignment to local needs. These comments reflect the difficulty of balancing strategic priorities with highly local targeting, especially within already compressed timescales for delivery.

6. Key Lessons

6.1 Overview

6.1.1 This section brings together the main lessons from the evaluation to inform future programme design and delivery. It highlights what worked well across different places, where challenges arose, and how local context, delivery choices and alignment with other provision shaped outcomes.

6.2 Cross-cutting implementation lessons

6.2.1 Across all themes, the evaluation highlights several cross-cutting implementation lessons, these relate to funding frameworks and coordination design and delivery oversight, data monitoring and evaluation readiness and collaboration and ecosystem building.

6.2.2 Funding framework and co-ordination

- **Provide multi-year funding with early guidance** - stable timelines improved planning;
- **Combine funds to enhance and expand impacts** - UKSPF often unlocked or complemented other capital streams (Transforming Towns, REPF), bringing projects forward or enabling more ambitious scope.

6.2.3 Design and delivery oversight

- **Combine regional coherence with local decision-making** - regional strategic coordination plus local ownership of delivery balanced alignment and responsiveness;
- **Resource central coordination** - a central point of contact and programme management capacity improved monitoring consistency and performance.

6.2.4 Data, monitoring and evaluation readiness

- **Support Mayoral Strategic Authorities and local authorities to be “M&E ready”** - guidance, best-practice sharing and capacity-building on monitoring, record-keeping and reporting strengthened accountability.

6.2.5 Collaboration and ecosystem building

- **Build on existing provision and networks** - leveraging trusted partners, academic links and community infrastructure sped mobilisation and widened access;
- **Encourage cross-project linkages** - referrals between business, skills and community strands supported the creation of pathways between services for beneficiaries.

6.3 Communities and Place

6.3.1 Lessons from Community and Place activity show that places achieved stronger outcomes when they combined physical investment with activity that encouraged people to use, value and take ownership of spaces. Evidence highlights the importance of sustained programming, locally distinctive delivery and mechanisms that worked together rather than in isolation.

6.3.2 Co-ordinating inclusive design

- **Pair physical improvements with cultural programming and stewardship** - assets were utilised more when linked up with events and volunteer coordination;
- **Invest in inclusive, accessible, family-friendly designs** which will broaden participation, including for vulnerable groups.

6.3.3 Community capacity, volunteering and outreach

- **Fund coordinators, micro-grants and light-touch support** - dedicated staff and small grants helped organisations design roles, recruit and retain volunteers and expand provision, including in grassroots groups;
- **Budget explicitly for outreach and partnership-working** - engagement is resource-intensive but critical in rural/disadvantaged communities to overcome stigma, transport and digital barriers; incentivise cross-project collaboration.

6.3.4 Safety and town-centre management

- **Co-locate visible services** to tackle crime/ASB e.g. Police engagement hubs .

6.4 Supporting Local Business

6.4.1 Lessons from Support Local Business point to the importance of flexible, targeted interventions that respond to local economic conditions and business needs. Programmes were most effective when they reduced practical barriers to growth through a mix of grant funding, advice, skills support and networking. Aligning UKSPF activity with existing business ecosystems and other funding streams helped extend reach and scale, while tailored delivery enabled new and early-stage firms to build capacity, access opportunities and progress at pace.

6.4.2 Delivery model design

- **Combine advisory support with small capital grants** - modest, targeted grants plus one-to-one advice delivered immediate gains in productivity, innovation, job creation and start-ups, especially for micro and small firms;
- **Use open calls to reach SMEs at scale to ensure wider uptake**, especially of smaller businesses.

6.4.3 Sector focus and strategic alignment

- **Align offers to local strengths and green goals** - sector specific approaches (e.g. agri-tech innovation, marine) and low-carbon adoption supported and built momentum where demand existed;
- **Leverage academic partnerships for knowledge transfer** - university linked projects provided technical expertise, internships and innovation support valued by SMEs.

6.4.4 Equity and sustainability

- **Present support as a coherent local offer**- packaging interventions as a single business support “suite” aided visibility and uptake, reducing duplication and improves “right support, right time” referrals;
- **Recognise long-term local challenges beyond individual programmes** - where regional business births were declining, grants mitigated rather than reversed trends, sustained follow-on support and longer-term monitoring were needed.

6.5 People and Skills

6.5.1 Evidence from People and Skills activity highlights the value of sequencing support and aligning provision with local labour market demand. Successful approaches matched the intensity and order of support to individuals’ starting points, particularly for those furthest from the labour market. Programmes worked best when they combined preparatory support, accredited training and strong employer links, creating clear progression routes into jobs. Embedding delivery within trusted local settings and coordinating provision across areas helped improve access, relevance and equity of outcomes.

6.5.2 Programme design and engagement

- **Lead with tailored, keyworker-led support** - individualised, person-centred models that identified barriers early and took small steps enabled engagement with those furthest from the labour market;
- **Sequence provision for progression** - confidence-building, basic/digital skills and volunteering acted as bridges into accredited training and job search, peer-led or demographic-specific formats helped reach underserved groups.

6.5.3 Alignment to local labour markets

- **Fund sector-relevant, accredited pathways** - licences and qualifications aligned to local employer demand produced recognised credentials and early employment outcomes;
- **Invest in digital inclusion** - community-based digital skills and connectivity unlocked access to services, learning and job search, particularly in rural areas.

6.5.4 Delivery management and continuity

- **Maintain continuity of provision** - gaps (e.g. delaying People and Skills to Year 3) led to lost expertise and service discontinuity; multi-year models supported trust-based engagement;

- Build strong partnerships: Collaboration with employers, colleges and VCSE partners improves pathways into work and learning.

6.5.5 Monitoring and longer-term outcomes

- **Improve long-term progress tracking, including where there are data lags** - many qualifications were awarded after reporting cut-offs, sustained employment and wage progression required longer timelines for data collection and monitoring;
- **Improve progress tracking for those with complex needs** - capture incremental gains (confidence, readiness, barrier reduction) where job outcomes may take longer, embed consent and follow-up from the outset.