Building community power in practice:
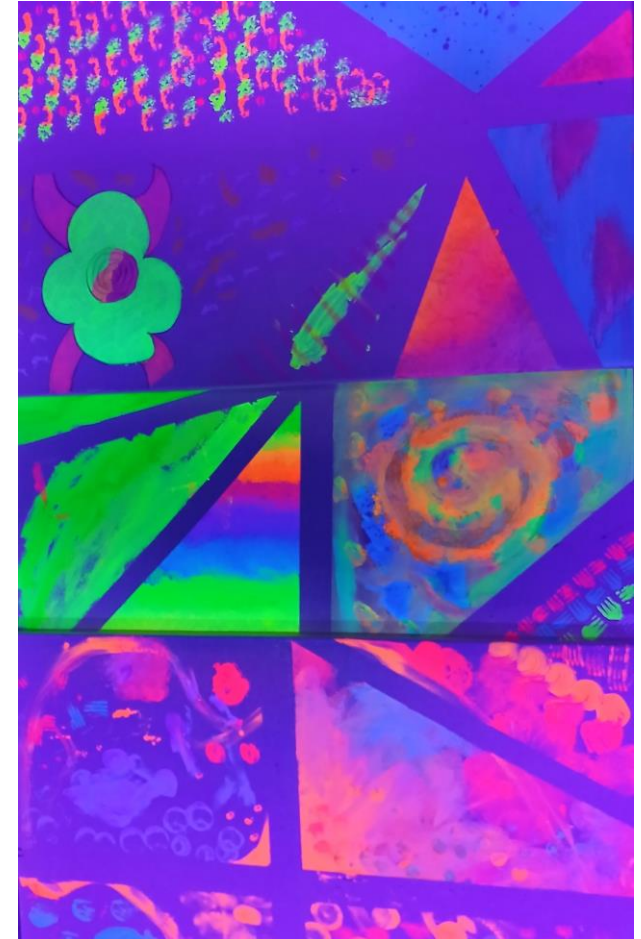
How the people of East Sussex have 'made it happen'

Summary of key messages from the evaluation of Making it Happen

May 2025

Contents

(Cover page artwork: Compass Arts)
Artwork: Youth Voice and Cup of Joy

Introduction

Making it Happen (MiH) was an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) programme commissioned by East Sussex County Council, which ran from October 2019 to March 2025.

MIH helped position East Sussex as a leading example of ABCD in action—revitalising community assets, strengthening local infrastructure, and embedding a culture of collaboration and learning.

These developments reflect a rise in social capital, supporting greater community power and resilience.

The following slides provide a brief overview of MIH and a summary of findings, recommendations and conclusion from a comprehensive evaluation conducted by Collaborate CIC.

The full report can be found here.

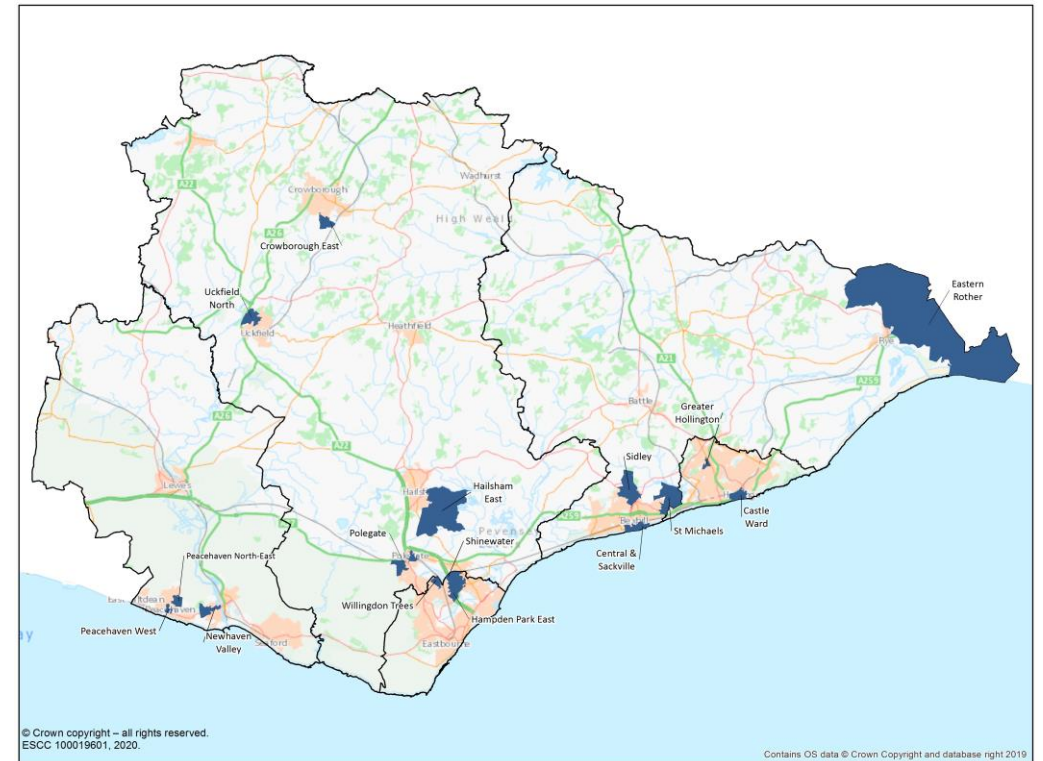*Artwork and photo: Explore the Arch – Four Courts Connect*

About Making it Happen

Geography

Five local VCSE partners were responsible for delivery of MIH in each of the Districts and Boroughs:

- **Eastbourne** – 3VA: Willingdon Trees, Shinewater, Hampden Park

- **Hastings** – Hastings Voluntary Action (HVA): Castle Ward and Greater Hollington

- **Lewes District** – Sussex Community Development Association (SCDA): Peacehaven and Newhaven

- **Rother** – Rother Voluntary Action (RVA): Bexhill Central and Sackville, Pebsham St Michaels, Sidley and Eastern Rother

- **Wealden** – Action in Rural Sussex (AiRS): Uckfield, Hailsham, Crowborough and Polegate

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About Making it Happen

Type and scale of activity

MiH did not prescribe a single model of change. People instead created conditions for ideas to emerge through individual confidence building, networking and collaboration, and civic participation, supported by our Community Development Workers (CDWs).

Between November 2019 and March 2025

£913,000 awarded via **363** Grants

62.4% of those who responded to a grant review survey **strongly agreed** that the grant helped them to achieve something valuable or useful in their community, with a further **30.9% agreeing**.

CDWs tracked **2644 'meaningful connections'** across the life of the programme. This was not the number of people reached, but evidence capture about the type and depth of **connections formed**, alongside reflections from CDWs on **shifts, changes or developments** witnessed.

Methodology

The evaluation focused on exploring if, how, why and for whom MiH works.

Methods were adopted that aligned with what was already happening in order that those closest to the work were able to direct and capture evidence that was meaningful and valuable to them.

The Four Shifts framework mapped four shifts in practice along various levels or scales at which those shifts may take place.

A summary illustration of the framework, with examples of indicators is shared overleaf.

Photo: Arts on Prescription

Methodology: Four Shifts Framework

	Deficits to strengths	Central to local	Isolation to collaboration	Assuming and prescribing to learning and responding
Within a person	People recognise their own skills, capabilities and contributions	People feel they have the ability to influence what happens in their community	Learning skills improves self-esteem and confidence	People recognise the value of their own experience and feel confident to articulate it
Person to person	People recognise their complementary skills, capabilities and contributions	Social networks change in diversity and type as community members connect and support one-another	Trust is built between people, fostering resilient and integrated communities	Groups express collective purpose and ambition
Between people and services	Services have different conversations with people – starting with what's strong, not what's wrong	VCSE organisations and services engage with existing community-led groups to understand a place	Formal and informal organisations/groups make connections	Communities and VCSE organisations and services jointly problem-solve
Between services and services and beyond	VCSE organisations and services adopt asset-based approaches e.g. opportunities to influence commissioning	VCSE organisations and services work together in a place-based way	Professionals are incentivised and given permission to collaborate and see the benefit	Services work together to hear and prioritise community voices, sharing what they learn

How, and why MIH worked

How: Growing community power

- MIH helped people to shift from feeling powerless to gaining confidence, capability and control over their lives.

- Through the asset-based way of working, CDWs and lead project facilitators supported the growth of social capital and community infrastructure—empowering people to act and connect.

Why: A way of working and a culture of learning

- MiH succeeded by valuing relationships over targets.

- Flexible funding, trust-based support, and peer learning enabled people to grow ideas, build confidence, and lead change in their own ways.

- CDWs focused on connection, not KPIs—creating space for lasting impact.

Artwork: POP Group

For whom MIH worked

For whom: People needing safe, non-judgemental spaces

- Activities supported through MIH created welcoming, informal spaces where people felt seen, safe, and accepted—especially those facing stigma or misunderstanding.

- Even those not seeking support found connection and strength through shared experience and mutual respect.

"I feel safe here, and it has become a home for our community" (Peacehaven Mosque participant)

Photo: Peacehaven Mosque Souper Social

What ABCD is – and isn't

ABCD is not a one-size-fits all.

- Strengths are recognised, rather than deficits.

- People are trusted to take leadership together with others rather than prescribing solutions.

- Action is rooted at the local level rather than centralised.

- CDWs and lead project facilitators enabled creative, community led approaches rooted in trust and collaboration.

Changing conceptions of self and of place

- MiH showed that communities can challenge the idea that "nothing can change."

- People with lived experience led the way—reshaping narratives, creating new possibilities, and finding meaning even in small actions.

- These shifts redefined how individuals saw themselves and their place in the community.

Models for understanding wellbeing tend to be individualising, emphasising things like choice, behaviour and self-management whereas the emphasis of MiH has been on situating the individual within the collective.

ABCD practice in MIH

Leading by stepping back

- Flexibility and deep listening by CDWs allowed space for people to define their own journey and drew attention to the symbiotic potential of new connections.

- The presence of CDWs mitigated against divisiveness between groups and other stakeholders, often making projects stronger.

Enabling confidence to grow

- Engagement in MIH activities led people to discover untapped assets within themselves, building confidence and agency.

- These discoveries constitute affirmations of the value of people's contributions, often leading to the development of new leaders.

"I believe that by showing groups and individuals 'trust', we enabled the positive effect that MIH has on participants confidence and self esteem" MIH CDW

Photo: Making it Happen Final Celebration event (credit: Clive Jarman)

Cultivating Assets

Types of assets

- Physical assets include things like land, buildings and equipment.

- Social assets include people's talents, skills, passions and collective efficacy, community associations and connections, and heritage, stories and culture.

- Physical and social assets intertwine, for example through gardens, schools and community centres.

- The Four Shifts framework was used to illustrate how a shift can take effect at different scales and through the uncovering and connection of assets.

Cultural assets

Services and beyond

People and services

Between people

Within a person

Cultivating Assets – within a person

Clarified purpose and learning skills

- Increased confidence empowered some to make deeper changes in their lives.

- Some built practical skills and crafts they can use every day.

- For others, building capabilities was the beginning of a longer learning journey.

- An environment of safety, non-judgement and belonging kept them on that journey.
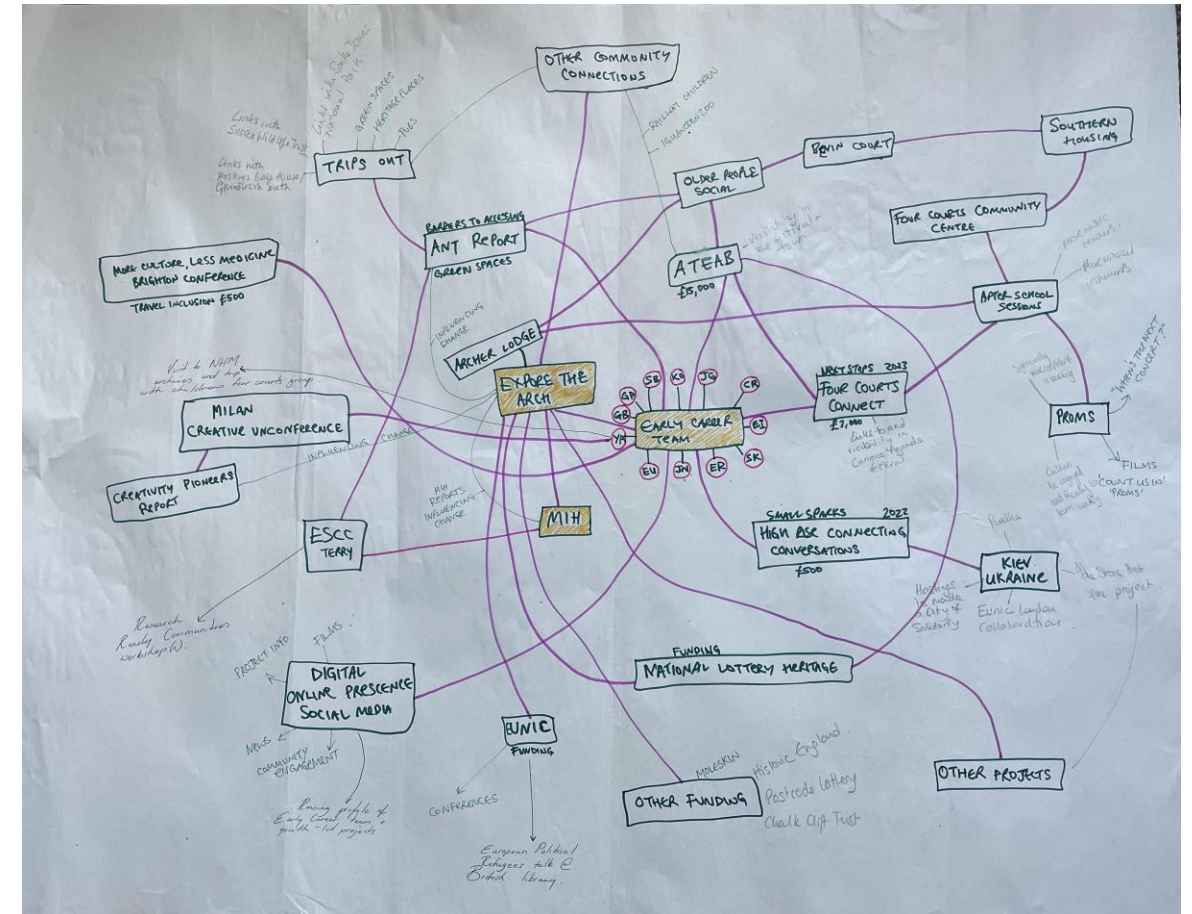

Photo: Explore the Arch ripple effect mapping

Cultivating Assets – *person to person*

Identification of shared experience - bonding

- Through peer-to-peer connection, people were able to articulate their experiences and recognise shared struggles and desires.

- Identification of experience is an important step in being able to learn from that experience, exercise voice, or shape services.

- ABCD contributes to a shift in stigmatising narratives by encouraging people to come to understand their struggles as ones which many people face.

Connection across difference - bridging

- Whilst bonding social capital was most common across MiH activities, there were examples in which connection across diverse groups resulted in understanding and belonging.

Connections that exist through MiH in this community didn't exist previously, partly due to the income gap between people who grew up in the area and those now moving there.
(Camber Book Stop)

Cultivating Assets – person to person

Skill Sharing

- Increased capacity and capability is supporting people to build transferable skills.

- Groups accommodated people of varying abilities and backgrounds.

- They utilised talents within the group and made best use of the resources that people were able to bring.

- New skills have proved useful for individuals, and also to meet needs in the broader community.

- Reciprocal, intergenerational skill-sharing has been a key feature of MiH.

In Selby Meadows, the older residents passed down their knowledge of local wildlife and conservation, while the younger participants introduced newer age ideas such as using digital tools to support environmental learning, collectively enhancing everyone's knowledge. "One of the kids showed me how to use the ID app to figure out the trees around us,"

Cultivating Assets – person to person

Collectives of people

- People have come together to pool resources and capacity for the benefit of shared interests or issues.

- Groups are building connections to grow their impact and to support one another, often creating ripple effects beyond the original programme.

- These collective efforts are strengthening civic involvement, with more diverse and evolving social networks sharing skills and other resources.

Bridging between groups

- Sometimes, one social group and another began to collaborate, building connection across diverse groups.

"It has become a community of skill sharers and enablers, organisers and encouragers, makers and demonstrators of their outside interests and personal projects often utilising the talents of the group as a whole." (Dockside Barrell Scrapers, lead facilitator)

Photo: Dockside Barrel Scrapers

Cultivating Assets – person to person

Converging for a shared purpose

- Groups have come together for the sake of a shared interest, pooling their capacity, and growing the number of people benefitting from their activities.

Learning from and with each other

- There has been 'permission' through MiH to visit other projects for advice and to work alongside each other.

- There is more evidence of groups coming together to learn and take action, expressing collective ambition.

- People have been engaging with others in their community on issues that are important to them.

In Hastings the Green Room has promoted trust and collaboration across sectors like the VCSE, energy, public health, and climate action.

In Eastbourne Community Table events have allowed MiH projects to connect, network, learn, exchange ideas, share their successes and challenges and leave a legacy of collaboration among local groups.

Cultivating Assets – person to person

Learning from and with each other

- Community groups have also led informal learning in ways that treat knowledge as a process of collective inquiry.

- Community groups and networks are building shared understanding of their neighbourhood, how to make things happen there and what needs to change.

- They do their own community storytelling and decide what's important for themselves.

In Newhaven The Hospitable Environment People's Knowledge Exchange came about to highlight the contributions of grassroots community organisations, create conversations across sectors, encourage new collaborations and to advocate for community voices in shaping future town planning and public services.

Photo: The People's Plan at the People's Knowledge Exchange (credit, Phoebe Wingrove)

Cultivating Assets – person to person

Spillover beyond MIH

- Relationships have extended to 'spillover' into conversations and connections outside of MiH.

- Being part of one group can be a gateway to getting involved in other things and in making new connections.

- The purpose of groups has evolved over time and some people who initially made connections through one activity have gone on to set up new initiatives.

Social Sunday's craft and chat drop-in sessions have led to connections that extend beyond the scope of the MiH-funded activity: "friendships have grown between people who have been attending, and some people meet up outside of the sessions".

Photo: Women of Vision

Cultivating Assets – between people and services

Accessing spaces

- Linking has primarily been to support communities to gain access to physical assets but also to open doors for other support.

- This is also where groups (even with CDW help) come up against bigger barriers.

- Accessing spaces for gathering has been a recurring challenge, with CDWs playing a crucial role in linking parts of the system together.

Bexhill Men's Shed came to have a physical space at a local college thanks to an introduction of a Shed member by a CDW to someone from the college at an event. This connection exempts the Shed from being at the whims of the real estate market given that the college is more insulated from fluctuations in the market. The connection to the college also presented an opportunity for intergenerational knowledge- exchange and possible volunteering recruitment.

Cultivating Assets – between people and services

Activating spaces

- Communities need to have a vested interest to care for local physical assets, but even unlikely spaces can become a hotspot if they are activated by / with the local community.

- MiH shows that social connections and physical spaces go hand in hand—stronger community ties help transform places, and shared spaces help build those ties.

Activating spaces

- Spaces can be more than meets the eye or mean something to a community that is less perceptible to someone outside of it.

Photos: Shinewater Garden planting day
Four Courts Connect, Hastings

Cultivating Assets – between people and services

Barriers to developing and utilising assets

- Economic outcomes from skill-building were less visible.

- People faced barriers when spaces weren't accessible, welcoming or easy to reach.

- There is also a lack of spaces, particularly in rural areas, making it difficult for people to forge connections and identify common goals.

- At times, a lack of collaboration from statutory or formal services made it harder to build on community assets.

- Multiple barriers may overlap. Understanding this intersection is key to addressing them effectively.

"My experience has been a mix – moments of elation when our initiatives were doing well, and frustration when the system felt like it was working against us" (Community Development Worker

Shifts on the Ground

- Taking part in MiH activities has improved people's health and wellbeing, helping reduce stress and anxiety, and to promote calm.

- Spending time outdoors and in nature—common in many MiH groups—has boosted mood, sleep, and overall energy.

- These wellbeing benefits have helped people stay more engaged and connected, strengthening both individual confidence and community ties.

- The following slides illustrate just a handful of the groups supported through MIH.

"The community belonging and connection, the joy, friendship, fun and laughter makes me remember what it truly is to be human." *(Hastings and St Leonards Drum Circle participant)*

"It made me realise this is where my passion is and is the direction I want my career to go in future" *(Crafty Trees project leader)*

"She went on to say that the warm space is a life-line for her – it keeps her going and she so looks forward to coming" *(Warm Welcome café volunteer about a participant)*

Clockwise from top left

- **Make Good Trouble, Bexhill**
- **Smiles for Miles, Crowborough**
- **Rye Community Garden, Eastern Rother**
- **Faygate Close, Bexhill**
- **Uckfield Warm Spaces cafe**

Clockwise from top left

- *Peacehaven Mosque Community Souper Social*
- *Take Action Man, Hastings*
- *Lets Get Fishing, Eastbourne*
- *Marline Court Garden and Craig's Cabin, Hollington*
- *Sunshine Playgroup, Shinewater*
- *Homes First Tenants Conference, Newhaven*
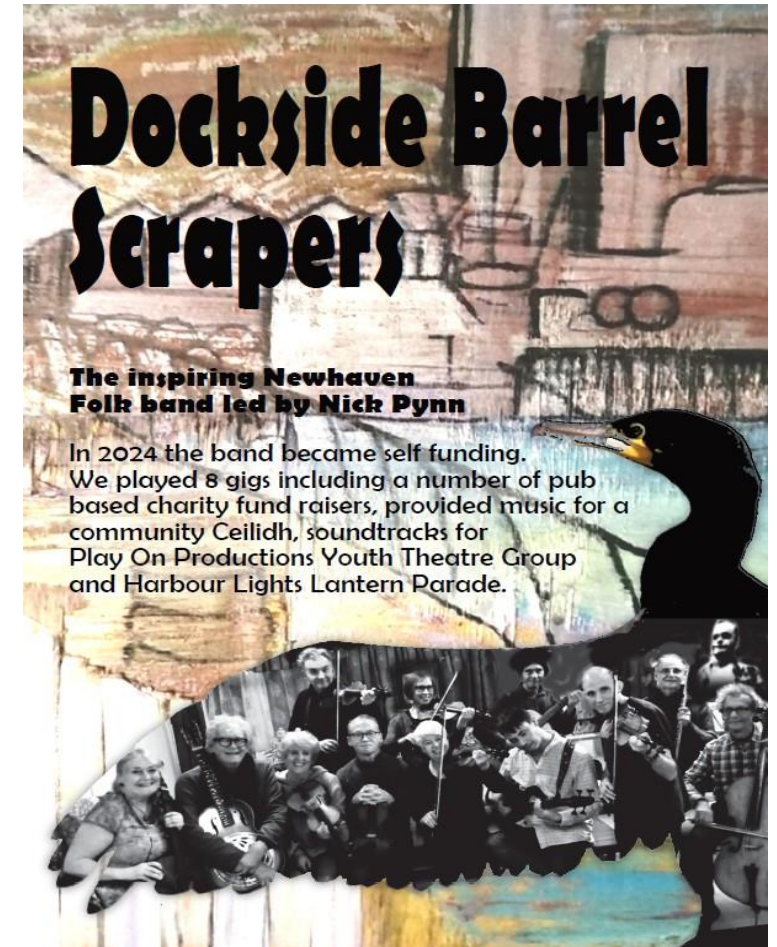
Learning for the system

Practising an Asset Based way of working

- **Trust is Foundational:** Building reciprocal, trust-based relationships from the outset is essential for meaningful, non-extractive engagement with communities.

- **Strategic Value:** Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approaches help align community engagement with strategic goals, but only when trust and dialogue are prioritised.

- **Meaningful Social Value:** Without efforts to foster genuine dialogue between the private sector and communities, Social Value commitments may lack depth and impact.

- **Benefits Beyond Communities:** Organisations report enhanced community engagement and improved staff morale and wellbeing as outcomes of adopting ABCD approaches.

- **Barriers to Participation:** Structural and social barriers can limit people's ability to engage, constraining the effectiveness and spread of asset-based approaches.

- **Culture of collaboration:** Collaborative cultures like that created by MiH are key; without them, competitive tendencies may resurface, undermining progress.

- **Support for Trusted Actors:** Individuals and organisations already trusted within their communities play a vital role in addressing marginalisation and must be actively supported.

RECOMMENDATION

Protect and sustain asset-based approaches to foster community power

- The collaborative culture developed through the programme has been key to building social capital.

- Sustaining these ways of working is essential to securing the programme's long-term legacy.

Dockside Barrel Scrapers artwork

Learning for the system

Grappling with responsibility and scale

- "Scaling deep" (The Art of Scaling Deep 2023) involves the personal and cultural transformation needed for lasting systems change. This is already evident in MiH through its strength-based, empathetic, and empowering practices that redefine success.

- Looking ahead, sustaining this impact requires shifting power to communities and ensuring funding models support long-term, non-linear outcomes.

- Grassroots work should not be expected to mirror specialist practice—flexibility, recognition, and support are essential. At times, however, when community capacity is stretched, the state must be ready to take or reclaim responsibility.

Artwork:: Rother Arts Network Diorama – hosted by WAVE Arts

RECOMMENDATION

Maintain support to foster system resilience

- Sustaining relationships and community-led activity is essential to preserving trust and achieving long-term impact on health and wellbeing.

- Ongoing support strengthens system resilience, drives better outcomes, and ensures value for public investment.
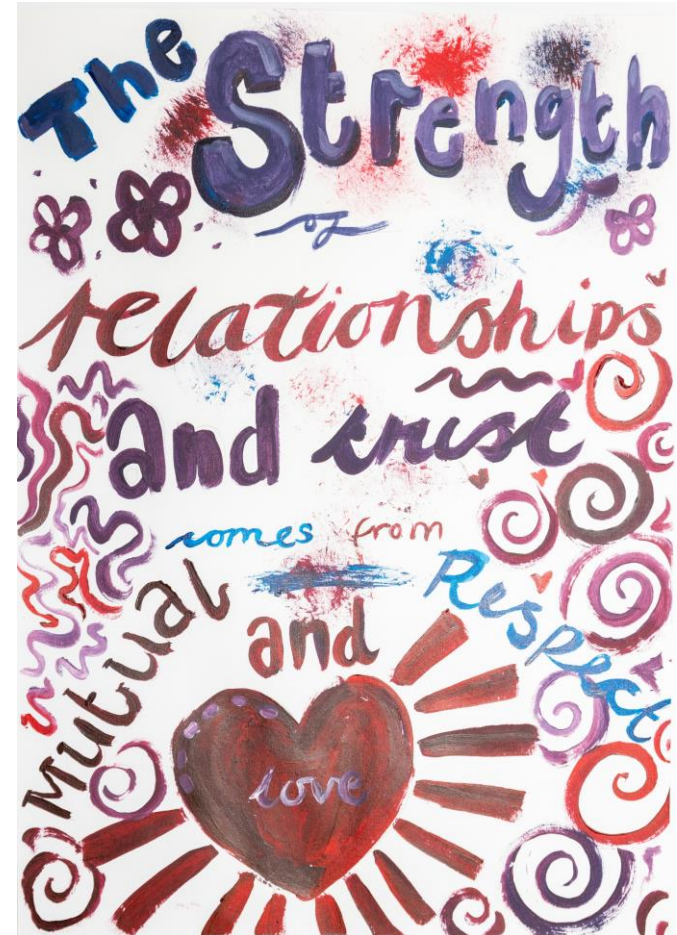
Artytime artwork

Learning for the system

Linking and learning across the system

- Community Development Workers (CDWs) have been key enablers of MiH's success—acting as champions, connectors, and critical friends.

- Their impact goes beyond individual tasks, highlighting the need for the wider system to recognise and support the holistic nature of their role.

RECOMMENDATION

Foster links and learning between communities and institutions

- Shift from one-off evaluations to ongoing learning that supports real-time adaptation and responsiveness.

- Tools like the Four Shifts framework can provide a shared language to guide reflection and track progress across diverse contexts.

Royal Society for Public Health Wellbeing Award ceremony

"I have never experienced a programme where positive words such as 'joy' have been so regularly mentioned" (MIH Commissioner from ESCC)

Conclusion

Securing the legacy of MIH

The true legacy of MiH lies in how its learning is carried forward. The programme has already strengthened individual and collective resilience by fostering connection, confidence, and community-led action.

Ongoing investment in social and community capital ensures future policies have a foundation to build on.

As East Sussex faces complex challenges, the increased resilience and clarity of purpose within its communities will be vital. The work of sustaining this momentum starts now.

Hospitable Environment Artwork

About Collaborate

Collaborate CIC is an innovative and growing social consultancy pioneering collaborative thinking and practice to tackle complex challenges across the UK.

Collaborate believe that complex social challenges and inequalities need a collaborative, cross-sector response.

They have a particular focus on supporting people to embed learning cultures and approaches in their programmes and partnerships, to enable meaningful and lasting change.

Victoria Pavilion Artwork

The Making it Happen Partnership

Making it Happen sought to embed ABCD principles in both work with communities, and in programme management.

The framework opposite proved a valuable tool to support a review of the partnership. This highlighted where and how the ABCD focus had contributed positively to shifts towards more collaborative behaviour and practice between delivery partner organisations over the course of the programme.

From "siloed" and detached	Collaborative Mindset	To aligned and recognised eco-system
From cold / stilted	Healthy / Trusting Relationships	To warm / informal
From multiple motivations / agendas	Shared Vision or Purpose	To a shared and understood vision
From shallow	Collaborative behaviours	To deep
From indifferent	Shared Learning	To curious
From inflexible / bureaucratic	Collaborative Infrastructure	To flexible and creative

This Framework was produced for Making it Happen and draws on Collaborate CIC Guide to Collaboration (2023)

Appendices – links

Full report

Area Rationale template

Area Snapshots

Phenomenal Happenings

Delivered in partnership by

3VA Wealden Eastbourne Lewes District

Action in rural Sussex

HVA Hastings Voluntary Action

Rother Voluntary Action

Sussex Community Development Association S C D A

Funded by East Sussex County Council

Full report produced by collaborate for social change