



# The Equalities, Community Engagement and Rural Partnerships Annual Report - 2020 - 21



*Working Together to Build  
Great Communities*

# Foreword

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**Mrs Pam Posnett, CC,  
Cabinet Lead Member Equalities,  
Community Engagement and Rural Partnerships**

This annual report covers a year dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic. It has been a year of huge challenges both globally and locally and this report sets out some of the ways in which the council has worked with and supported communities in Leicestershire, in tackling one of the most difficult periods in our history.

Whilst the pandemic has presented enormous difficulties for Leicestershire communities, it has also offered us very many examples of positive community spirit, the willingness of people to volunteer to help others and provide support to their neighbours, particularly those who are most vulnerable, and the value of what can be achieved from within our communities.

I hope that the work outlined in this report provides the inspiration for us all to continue with, and build on, the enhanced community networks and initiatives that have been established over the past year and which have done so much to advance our goal of sustaining strong, resilient, happy and healthy communities in Leicestershire.



# Introduction

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This Annual Report highlights achievements within the Communities portfolio for the Cabinet Lead Member for Equalities, Community Engagement and Rural Partnerships. The work has been delivered by the Communities Team and by complementary service areas comprising:

- **Grants and Funding**
- **Policy and Equalities**
- **Resilience and Emergency Planning**
- **Economic Development**
- **Communities and Wellbeing (within the Adults & Communities Department)**

The Communities Team forms part of the Communities, Policy and Resilience Service, located within the Strategy and Business Intelligence Branch of the Chief Executive's Department. The Team works to provide high quality leadership and strategic support to the delivery of the Council's Strategic Plan 2018-22 and the Leicestershire Communities Strategy ('Working Together to Build Great Communities') which sets out the Council's continuing commitment to work in partnership to support, strengthen and empower communities. The Team's mission is;

*“Together we will empower Leicestershire Communities to become Strong, Resilient, Happier and Healthier”.*

The work of the Communities Team is focussed on supporting communities to be active, resilient and inclusive, helping to manage demand for services through prevention and early intervention activities and projects, and supporting communities to design and deliver services locally, sometimes with the support of grants and funding. Progress and proposals are overseen and driven forward by the Communities Board which includes senior representatives from across the Authority.



# Project Initiatives

The **Leicestershire County Council Communities Fund** was launched on Monday 30th March 2020, following a decision made by Cabinet to establish a £1m fund to help VCSE sector organisations to continue providing services for vulnerable people during the Covid-19 pandemic. The grant fund was subsequently increased in value and extended through further rounds of funding to help voluntary groups to manage the impacts of the pandemic and to continue to deliver services for vulnerable and disadvantaged people and communities.

*In total, over 3 rounds of funding, **379 grants** were **awarded**, totalling nearly **£2.6m** of funding from the County Council.*

Details of projects awarded funding through the Leicestershire Communities Fund in 2020-21, an Outcomes and Impacts Report and case studies are available at:

[www.leicestershirecommunities.org.uk/communities-fund](http://www.leicestershirecommunities.org.uk/communities-fund)

In recognition of the efficient and responsive way the Communities Fund was administered, the council received an award from the charity Leicestershire Cares, which highlighted the difference the funding had made to community organisations in such a short timescale, during a time of significant challenges.

## Contact:

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Oasis Pre-school was funded by the Leicestershire Communities Fund



An Academy for Dementia Research home visit funded by the Leicestershire Communities Fund

**Parish and Town Councils** - The council, in partnership with Leicestershire & Rutland Association of Local Councils (LRALC), has continued to support Parish and Town Councils in their role as community leaders and as providers of community managed services and activities throughout the last year.

As part of our response to the pandemic, and the support offered to Parish & Town Councils, LRALC carried out a 'Financial Impact' project to establish what support was most needed amongst our Town & Parish Councils.

In response to the results of the project, the LRALC provided a briefing paper for all Parish & Town Councils, provided two Zoom sessions offering financial advice and guidance, and provided 1:1 support to Councils that needed more in-depth assistance. They also approached District/Borough Councils on behalf of Clerks to access grants to help maintain staff and premises at larger parish councils. This piece of work has identified several areas that we will be working with the LRALC on to address over the next 12 months, to ensure support is available to Parish & Town Councils around the budgeting and precept process.

Our operational meetings with Parish Clerks adapted to on-line meetings via Zoom in May 2020 and are now held every 6 weeks. A short survey was conducted via the LRALC Round Robin weekly email message service to review the timings of meetings with a view to making the meetings more accessible to Clerks. Following the survey, the meetings have been held on alternate days and times which has increased the number of attendees.

Input and attendance at the operational meetings from senior colleagues in the Environment and Transport Department continues, alongside the Customer Service Centre e-mail address for parish councils, both of which have helped to address common enquiries from Parish & Town Councils in a timely manner.

The introduction of two new on-line resources from the Environment & Transport Department have also been well received. The '[Information for Parishes and Communities](#)' Webpage offers up to date information and advice on topics including recycling, the broadband connectivity programme, grass cutting and HS2. A new Highways Website, '[A Roads to Zebras](#)' offers Parishes and community's information and advice around Traffic Calming, HGVs, Crossings, Parking and School Parking.

We have worked closely with the LRALC to advance understanding, interest, and involvement in Climate Emergency throughout the last year. LRALC was successful in securing a Shire Environmental Grant towards the cost of a 'Climate Emergency Action Day' for Parish & Town Councils in Leicestershire, which was run by the Centre for Sustainable Energy and took place in December 2020. The event was well attended and produced a useful summary report along with supporting tools, which are available on the [Leicestershire Communities website](#). There was a follow up discussion with county council Environment Team members at one of the Clerks operational meetings, and also a survey of all Parish Clerks to help shape the county council's support to Parish & Town Councils in working towards Carbon Neutrality by 2045.

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*Ongoing communication is supported by departmental input to the LRALC Town & Parish Council's bi-monthly newsletter and contributions to the LRALC 'Round Robin' weekly update.*  
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**Volunteering** has been a key theme throughout the last year and one which the Communities Team has continued to co-ordinate, promote and support. A strategic volunteer advisory group was formed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and this has ensured that Volunteer Managers and their volunteers have been able to access consistent messaging and support for volunteering to safely continue and adapt to ever changing circumstances.

Many volunteers have continued to offer their support to our service delivery and communities throughout the pandemic through their traditional roles or by innovating and adapting to new ones. There has also been overwhelming volunteer support for the emergency response which supported shielding and vulnerable members of the community. During and after the initial lock-downs volunteers took part in new and creative projects supporting mental health and wellbeing in communities and also returned to essential roles such as helping Country Parks to enable safe access to outdoor spaces and supporting vulnerable young people and their families with home schooling.

In the community the Team has continued to support all aspects of volunteering from social action and good neighbourliness through to promoting the benefits of formal volunteering which range from tackling isolation and loneliness, through learning new skills and gaining experience to returning to or changing employment.

With its strategic overview the Communities Team seeks to signpost, co-ordinate and champion the valuable role of our volunteer managers and highlight the infrastructure needed to properly support them and their work. To this end we have procured a new single volunteer management system for the Authority which will enable all our volunteer roles to be better co-ordinated and offer new and wider ways to engage with volunteers in the future.

**The Leicestershire Communities** [website](#) provides a range of useful information to help support, promote and facilitate social action in communities. It is focussed on helping people, individuals and groups to actively participate in their communities, through the sharing of relevant information, tools and resources to support and enable community action.

The website includes resources around setting up a community group and accessing grants and funding, along with case studies of successful community projects. It also provides details about the Leicestershire Community Fund and SHIRE Grants programme, Neighbourhood Planning and Community Managed Libraries, as well as additional information relating to 'Asset Based Thinking and Doing' and a Community Engagement Toolkit for Parish and Town Councils. The site further provides the opportunity for individuals to join the Communities Network, along with up-to-date news and information on upcoming events. Many areas of the website are managed and maintained by community members who have been trained by the Communities Team in the skills required.

*Use of the website has grown steadily since it was launched and for the year April 2020 to March 2021 the site has attracted over **100,000** page-views and just under **25,000** users.*

Throughout the year the Leicestershire Communities website has played a key role in the delivery of the Communities Fund. It has enabled the Communities Team to give the public access to information about the Fund and provided the facility to submit an online application within a matter of days of finalising details of the grant scheme. It also enabled officers working remotely to have access to grant applications quickly and effectively to undertake their assessments.



In Leicestershire there are now 125 active **Neighbourhood Planning Groups** which have produced 38 Adopted Plans and 105 Designated Areas. Due to the pandemic all Neighbourhood Planning Referendums were suspended until after 6 May 2021. The details of Neighbourhood Plans and Areas, including those awaiting referendums, can be found on the [NP Status Details](#) sheet.

The Communities Team continues to provide support and advice for plan development as well as providing timely and co-ordinated consultation responses from the county council. Well-designed plans can help to reduce demand on public services and align with strategic needs as well as the priorities of the local area. Due to the pandemic, we have been unable to hold our usual networking events which provide valuable support to groups and those interesting in finding out more about neighbourhood planning. The first virtual Neighbourhood Planning Event was held on 25th May 2021 and proved to be a successful and safe way to deliver these events.

*There are **250 members** signed up to the Neighbourhood Planning Network and the neighbourhood planning pages of the Leicestershire Communities website continue to be a popular source of information.*

Central Government continues to promote neighbourhood plans to communities as a way of taking local control and responsibility to develop a shared vision for local neighbourhoods and to shape the development and growth of local areas. This is backed up by funding provided by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government through the national voluntary sector support charity Locality.



***Friendly Communities of Leicestershire*** is an open and innovative approach to community engagement, designed and developed by the Communities Team in conjunction with colleagues that aims to:

- Support social action.
- Scale up existing initiatives that are organised and developed in communities (Friendly Bench, Autism Friendly Environments, Dementia Friendly Communities, etc.).
- Recognise the role these initiatives play in supporting local communities to lessen isolation and loneliness and reduce the need for more expensive services.
- Spread good practice by making connections with other projects, interest groups and colleagues and by supporting local initiatives to establish and potentially share knowledge and expand.

During the year the Communities Team has continued to work across departments and with communities to support collaboration and inclusive community initiatives, and to develop guidance to promote the approach.

The Friendly Communities Working Group is led by the Communities Team and was created at the end of 2019 to support, develop and test the Friendly Communities model. The Group has had a very successful year, testing community-based initiatives that help to improve participation, reduce duplication and support inclusive, participative and friendlier communities. Some examples of this activity are:

- The Autism Outreach Teacher has started using the principles of Friendly Communities to bring communities together to provide friendlier environments for young people with autism, and their families and carers.
- The Special Project Development Officer, based in the Environment and Transport Department, is working successfully with parish councils to enhance links and relationships with local communities with a focus on supporting schemes

that communities can own and deliver.

- The next phase of the Friendly Communities Project is to assess the success of the pilots and develop an evidence base that can be used across other Departments that work with communities.

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### ***The Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Resilience Partnership***

The officers in the Resilience Partnership Team undertake a wide range of projects for individual authorities, for authorities collectively and by representing local authorities across the multi-agency LLR Prepared Forum.

One of the key responsibilities of the team is provision of a 24/7 365 days per year emergency response first point of contact for local authorities. The Duty Officer also receives, coordinates and assesses community emergency information such as flood alerts, flood warnings and severe weather warnings both in and out of hours, alerting and working alongside relevant services.

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***In addition to the Duty Officer support, the Partnership also supports authorities and communities in responding to, and recovering from, incidents.***

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This year the Partnership has been primarily focused on coordinating and supporting the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has involved working within individual councils, collectively with LLR local authorities and across the wider Local Resilience Forum partners. This wide range of workstream areas has included support for shielded residents, provision of PPE and arrangements for increased mortuary capacity.

Support has also been provided for planning for the recovery phase of the pandemic. The Team has also responded to several flood events and an avian flu outbreak as well as planning for/responding to the implications of the EU Exit Transition.



The **Green Plaque Awards** continue to provide engagement within communities and across the county. They bring together people of all ages and backgrounds to nominate, vote on and ultimately celebrate the people and places they feel deserve recognition.

Before the Awards were suspended due to the pandemic, we unveiled two Green Plaques. The first in South Kilworth to astronomer William Pearson. The unveiling of this Green Plaque coincided with the 200th anniversary of the Royal Astronomical Society which Pearson co-founded. Alongside members of the local community including children from South Kilworth Primary school which Pearson also founded, the event was well-attended by representatives of all key local and national astronomical organisations.

World War I hero and surgeon, John Cridlan Barrett VC was next in line, receiving his Green Plaque just days before the first national lockdown. The event was attended by representatives of the Royal Leicestershire Regiment, as well as representatives from the University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust, where Barrett was a consultant until his retirement in 1962. In advance of the unveiling, schoolchildren from Parkland Primary School had studied the extraordinary life of this WWI hero, and were able to delight assembled guests with what they had learned.



#### Guests at the unveiling of the Green Plaque for John Cridlan Barrett VC

Despite being unable to meet in person this year, the shortlisting panel remotely reviewed the 32 nominations for a Green Plaque Award and chose the 12 to go forward for the public vote. The public will have the opportunity to choose their six favourites later in the year.

Community involvement is at the heart of the Awards, and as restrictions start to ease on group gatherings, we will continue to engage individuals, societies, organisations and schools in choosing the local heroes they feel deserve to be honoured with a Leicestershire County Council Green Plaque Award.



***The Leicestershire Rural Partnership*** (LRP) is an established and successful partnership which brings together public, private and voluntary stakeholders to improve services and support rural communities and businesses. During 2020/21 the Partnership has continued to champion issues relevant to rural communities including:

1. Rural inclusion and skills; focused on supporting those furthest from the labour market to move closer to work. Leicestershire has the only specific project for rural areas funded through the European Social Fund - the Work, Live. Leicestershire (WiLL) project is led by Vista in partnership with the County Council (providing Work Clubs) and the Rural Community Council and has enabled access to employment in rural areas of Leicestershire.
2. Shaping communities and places; through support for Neighbourhood Plans and the Rural Housing Enabler project which is increasing the supply of affordable housing in rural areas.
3. Superfast Leicestershire, which has continued to deliver into rural areas. Phase 2 has now been completed which means that 85,000 premises across Leicester and Leicestershire can access superfast broadband and over 300 villages and towns are connected. The Phase 3 contract has now been signed and will deliver to additional premises in Hinckley and Bosworth, North West Leicestershire, Charnwood and Blaby. The team are working with the Department of Culture Media and Sport on the National Gigabit Voucher Scheme.
4. The LRP has prioritised working in partnership with the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership during 2020/21 to ensure the needs and priorities of rural Leicestershire are included in the Economic Recovery Action Plan which highlights issues and actions being carried out to address short-term issues faced because of the pandemic. The Partnership has also fed evidence into the emerging longer-term Economic Recovery Strategy, including the Rural Evidence Base. The LRP has also led on work regarding Natural Capital for inclusion in the Strategy.



## Leicestershire Business Recovery Fund

The County Council originally applied for £750,000 of Business Rate Pooled Funding to deliver a grant scheme to replace LEADER and EAFRD (European rural community, business and agricultural funding) in the short-term until alternatives such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund were established. With the onset of the pandemic however the funding was quickly re-purposed into the Business Recovery Fund and was delivered over a 5-month period.

*The Fund received **207 applications** and assisted **106 businesses** with **£709,000** of grant aid that has safeguarded **234 jobs** and will support the creation of a further **94 new jobs**.*

### Business Recovery Fund applications approved by Sector

Sector	No. of Applications
Independent Business (Including Retail)	67
Tourism and Hospitality	11
Agriculture	11
Creative	17



**Community Managed Libraries** are now an established and successful part of the Leicestershire Library Service. There are 35 community managed libraries embedded in local areas and offering a wide range of hub services including adult learning, work clubs, Keep Safe Places, café facilities, meeting areas for community groups and bases for Local Area Coordination, in addition to traditional library services. The Communities Team has continued to work with colleagues in the Communities and Wellbeing Service and with Voluntary Action Leicestershire to support service delivery, collaboration between libraries, sustainability and financial management. Information on individual community managed libraries is available at [www.leicestershirecommunities.org.uk/cml/](http://www.leicestershirecommunities.org.uk/cml/)



# Services and Projects Commissioned

**Countywide Infrastructure Services** – Support for the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE) in Leicestershire is provided by an infrastructure services contract that is delivered by Voluntary Action Leicestershire (VAL). The service is jointly commissioned with West Leicestershire Clinical Commissioning Group and East Leicestershire and Rutland Clinical Commissioning Group. It is aligned to the shared objectives of the County Council and CCGs, specifically those around managing demand through early/community level intervention and prevention, increasing community resilience and more effective delivery of services by community groups. During 2020/21 the Service has focused on Covid 19 response and recovery and contributing to the work of the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Resilience

Partnership. A key part of this work has been co-ordinating volunteering across the sub-region, building on the role of VAL as the Volunteer Centre for the City and County. In addition to supporting volunteering for voluntary groups, VAL has recruited over 1,000 Covid volunteers to support vulnerable people. All these volunteers were offered at least one volunteering opportunity and 56% were mobilised to support vulnerable people with food and medication, provide transport to and from medical appointments/hospital discharge for patients, provide shopping for vulnerable people, distribute information about support available and provide befriending/checking-in support. Later in the year VAL also recruited around 1,250 county volunteers to support the vaccination programme.



VAL volunteers supporting Covid response and recovery



In addition to the above VAL has continued to provide support for voluntary sector groups and organisations with a particular emphasis on:

- Promoting funding opportunities to provide help during the pandemic when other income generation opportunities were often not be possible.
- Providing Covid related advice and guidance through a helpline and promoting Government, NHS and Charity Commission/Companies House guidance via the website, e-newsletter, blogs, and social media.
- Providing ongoing governance, volunteering, and development support to sector organisations.

**Community Buildings** are the essential physical fabric from where community activities take place, where people meet and from where services are delivered. The Communities Team has worked with the Rural Community Council, Leicestershire and Rutland (RCC) to provide an ongoing programme of support for groups that run village halls and community centres and to support the development of new facilities and service delivery arrangements. During the Covid pandemic support for community

building has focused on providing information, advice and guidance on lockdown restrictions, compliance with Covid requirements, Covid related funding, foodbanks, Trustee meetings, risk assessments and Covid secure measures etc. Training programmes for community building providers have continued to be delivered via webinars covering topics such as effective management of village halls, reopening of halls, safeguarding and loneliness.



Botcheston Village Hall has served as the base for the Botcheston Support Network. It was used as a “shopping hub” for wholesale food purchases distributed to local people who were isolating.



**Citizen's Advice Bureaux** services are supported by the County Council jointly with district councils.

Citizens Advice Leicestershire and Charnwood Citizens Advice Bureau provide community advice and support with a focus on issues relating to benefits, debt, homelessness and employment. Between them the Citizens Advice Bureaux provide advice services across the County to help people to manage debt and money, remain in employment, improve their health and well-being and stay in their homes.

Over the past year Citizens Advice has supported continuing high numbers of people despite the change to predominantly phone and on-line support by both staff and volunteers. A broad range of assistance has been maintained but with an increased focus on employment advice, especially the self-employed who have been unable to work and need to understand the support they can get. There has also been an increase in working people needing to claim in-work benefits because of layoffs, zero hours contracts where no hours are being given, and furlough. Help with Universal Credit claims also increased significantly during the year.

**Social Enterprises** – CASE (Cooperative and Social Enterprise Development Agency) provide a social enterprise support service across Leicestershire. In 2020-21 CASE provided support to over 40 existing and emerging social enterprises to develop their businesses through help with: strategic planning; partnership links; developing robust income streams and accessing other sources of funding. As a result of CASE's input, over 100 jobs were created or saved in the social enterprise sector. CASE have also contributed to the Council's corporate approach to the Social Value Act. In addition, CASE has contributed to wider Council agendas, by sitting on the Business Board of the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership (LLEP); providing expert advice around mutualism and alternative service delivery options; offering support to projects supporting business growth and offering guidance on alternative finance, such as social investment and community shares.

**The Signposting and Community Support Service** (SCSS) provides predominantly re-used/graded furniture and electrical goods (to enable people to move out of temporary accommodation, access tenancies etc.) together with emergency short-term food and fuel support to people in hardship and crisis. The Service also delivers preventative support focused on debt and money management and is provided by a partnership involving all District Councils, Charity Link, Citizens Advice Bureaux, The Bridge (East Midlands), Leicestershire and Rutland Reuse Network and Women's Aid.

Furniture or electrical items can be donated by contacting:

**Hinckley Worklink** ([www.worklinkproject.co.uk/donate-items.html](http://www.worklinkproject.co.uk/donate-items.html)),

**SOFA** (Loughborough - <http://sofareuse.org/donate>), or

**Open Hands** (Leicester City - [www.openhandsleicester.org.uk/donate/](http://www.openhandsleicester.org.uk/donate/))



**Healthwatch** exists to give local people an effective voice about their health and social care services. The service for Leicester and Leicestershire has been jointly commissioned with Leicester City Council and is delivered in an integrated way across the City and County. The Leicester and Leicestershire Healthwatch service has established positive relationships with health and social care providers to highlight patient and carer's concerns and secure improvements. Achievements from 2020/21 have included:

- Providing community advice and signposting regarding the Covid pandemic, access to health and care services via website updates, social media and phonline support.
- Championing the involvement/interests of communities in changes to services (Hospitals and Maternity Reconfiguration), especially marginalised groups and supporting engagement with these groups.
- Gathering community feedback on experiences of Covid 19 and reporting to health and care commissioners and providers to support enhanced service adaptation, communications and delivery.
- Providing volunteering support for shielding and vulnerable people during periods of lockdown.



# Strategy & Policy Development

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## *Equalities*

The council adopted a new Equalities Strategy to cover the period from 2020-2024. The Strategy meets the council's obligation under the Equality Act 2010 to set itself specific and measurable equality objectives at least every four years. It was informed by engagement with the Leicestershire Equalities Challenge Group and a range of organisations representing protected characteristic groups.

The Strategy addresses workforce issues, service delivery issues and community engagement. Key achievements during the year include holding staff discussion forums on issues such as Black Lives Matter, access for deaf and hard of hearing service users, and support for transgender colleagues and service users. The council commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day and celebrated diverse religious festivals. A new induction workbook for all staff on "Promoting Fairness and Respect" has been produced and is available on-line.

The council continues to be a Disability Confident, Mindful Employer and is in Stonewall's 100 top employers' index. During the year the council commissioned an external review of progress for Black, Asian and Minority Employees (BAME). This led to a new task group and a commitment to sign up to the Race at Work Charter which sets standards for the retention and development of BAME Staff.

The council has taken on direct responsibility for managing the relationship with the Leicestershire Equalities Challenge Group (LECG). This group was formerly overseen through a contract with Age UK. The new arrangements, and new leadership of the LECG, offer the opportunity to ensure that the work is focussed on the issues facing the council and that the advice of the group can shape the council's policies and practice.

The Coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on inequalities across the County. There is evidence that BAME individuals and people with learning disabilities are more at risk of serious illness from the virus, and pressure on the NHS is leading to delays in treatment for people with long-term conditions such as cancer and mental health. The associated lockdown may also result in the exacerbation of inequalities in educational achievement, employment and poverty across the country and within Leicestershire. A key task will be to ensure that such inequalities are addressed in the council's recovery work with communities in the next year.

***Asset Based Approaches*** – The work that the Communities Team has carried out in previous years around asset-based approaches and encouraging social action came sharply into focus in the past year as communities came together to support each other. Using asset based techniques, the Team is capturing the "community spirit" displayed during lockdowns and looking to translate this into policies and practices for working with citizens in the future. This includes:

- Supporting departments to move to strength-based approaches in their service planning and delivery.
- Directly delivering and facilitating asset-based training sessions, for example to young volunteers.
- Building a picture of local and national best practice and resources.
- Embedding a strength-based approach within key strategic documents, promoting, supporting and enabling social action.

## Armed Forces Covenant

The Communities Team and the council were incredibly proud to be awarded the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) gold award in 2020, one of only 17 employers in the East Midlands to achieve this. The Ministry of Defence award encourages employers to support defence and inspire others to do the same.

We continue to support the Armed Forces Covenant and Armed Forces Family (those who have served in the armed forces, reservists, adult cadet volunteers and carers for a former member of the armed forces) in Leicestershire and beyond around the themes of:

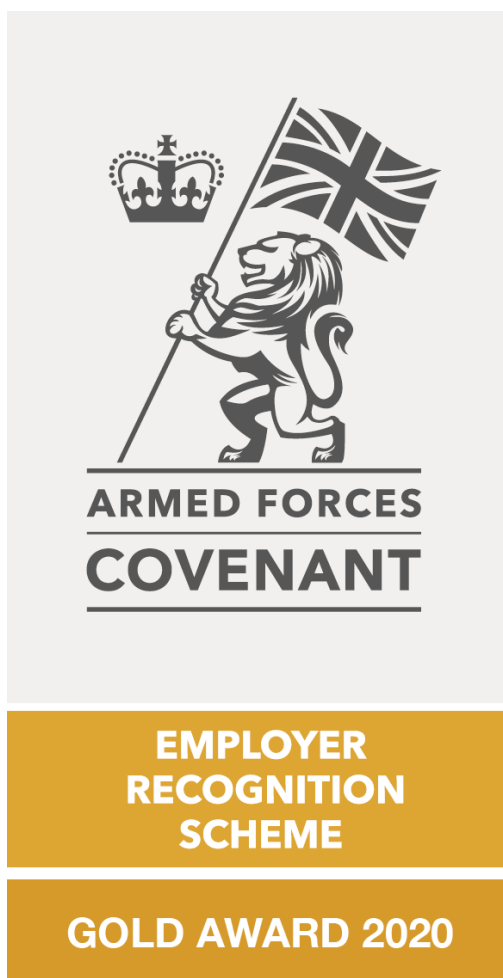
- Encouraging local communities to support their local armed forces community and vice versa.
- Promoting public understanding and awareness of issues that affect the armed forces community.
- Recognising the sacrifices made by the armed forces community.
- Encouraging activities which help integrate the armed forces community into local life.

Through the last year the focus of work has been:

- Supporting the regional Civil and Military Partnership Board covering Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland to develop and deliver a regional action plan co-ordinating the work of local authorities, universities, military charities and our armed forces.
- Hosting a council armed forces employee network which supports forces family employees and explores ideas about how we can better improve service delivery to this cohort.

- Maintaining ties with the Ministry of Defence Employment Engagement Team including attending Partnering with Defence training and events.
- Commemorating several important remembrance events relating to previous conflicts including WW1 and WW2 events.

*We continue to develop our Armed Forces support programme, further supporting the Armed Forces Family cohort through Covid-19 recovery and beyond.*



**Consultation and Engagement** – The Council undertook a wide range of engagement activity during 2020/2021 including 16 formal consultations and 3 sizable informal engagement projects. The Covid-19 pandemic had a strong impact on the council's consultation activity. The first significant impact was the reduced level of consultation in the Spring and Summer of 2020 as priorities were shifted away from business as usual activity and into responding to the pandemic. The volume of activity then increased through the Autumn of 2020 and continues to grow.

A second impact of the pandemic was the shift to almost exclusively online engagement activity. Where possible, the face-to-face interactions that members of the public might expect (focus groups, roadshows, exhibitions, officer Q&A sessions) were replicated using online channels. This included running focus groups via video conferences and using specialist software to create interactive exhibition spaces where people could view and alter maps and diagrams, exchange comments on the proposals, and ask questions.

Throughout the last year, the Engagement and Consultation Manager (based in the Policy Team) worked closely with colleagues in Business Intelligence and Communications to advise Departments on public engagement. Taken together, the three teams comprise a strong support offer from the corporate centre, ensuring that staff across the organisation maintain the council's high standard of public engagement in all the work they undertake. The Engagement Hub serves as an important cross-council forum for officers working on engagement to meet, troubleshoot problems, share best practice and to ensure efficient use of our resources.

Following discussions with Members, officers and local communities, the council's approach to engagement has been reviewed and refreshed, resulting in a focus on key areas of activity: An LCC Engagement Strategy has been developed that will

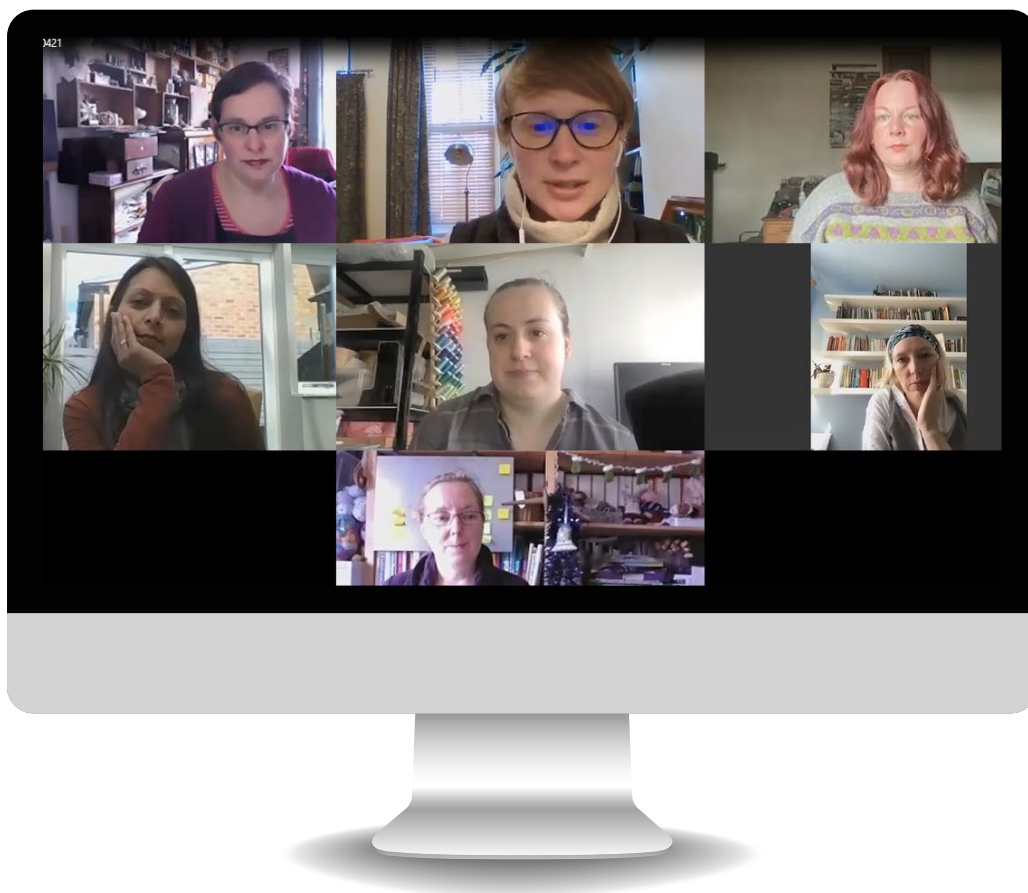
be progressed through corporate governance over the coming summer, accompanied by an Annual Report on engagement over the 2020/21 financial year. In addition, the council is in the process of signing up to a charter of best practice developed by the Consultation Institute, the UK's national body on consultation and engagement. This will be accompanied by workshops for staff on national best practice in this area, as well as discussion of the specific priorities and challenges that the council might face.

The council recognises that the pandemic has considerably changed how officers talk with local communities, and how they expect to talk to us. The last year has enabled the organisation to test new approaches, but also to develop a better understanding of how digital poverty, literacy levels and other barriers continue to prevent many people from getting involved. We are keen to further improve our understanding in this area and are doing so in collaboration with academics at Loughborough University.

*In addition, the council undertook a project specifically aimed at understanding the impact of the pandemic on communities that may not have had their voice heard.*

'[Conversations about Covid](#)' targeted groups with existing links to the council and individuals who wanted to share their story of the last year with us. Officers held informal and open conversations with groups of older Asian women, parent-carers of young people with autism, artists, pub managers and young people in care, amongst others. The project showed the value of informal interactions on broad issues and enabled key messages to be fed back into departments to improve how we communicate and deliver services.





Participants at a Conversations about Covid discussion

*“ Looking ahead, public engagement will be a key part of stabilizing services following the pandemic and navigating some of council’s priority areas, such as delivering on our environmental commitments. It is essential that we learn from the experience of pandemic and ensure that the council’s approach continues the existing good practice whilst innovating in ways that remain accessible for all our communities”.*

