Executive Summary

2022 – 2024 Evaluation Partnership

December 2025

RENAISI

in partnership
with

Sanctuary

sustainable
communities

Sanctuary

Sanctuary's mission is to build affordable homes and sustainable communities where people choose to live. We are a not-for-profit housing association, providing homes and care for more than 250,000 people in England and Scotland. Every penny that we make is reinvested in improving our homes and services, building new affordable homes and investing in communities. We are driven by our charitable and social purpose and our values.

We believe that no one should be excluded or left behind. We believe that everyone should have a home to live in and community they can belong to. We want to help build a society with opportunities for everyone, regardless of their background or circumstance. As one of the largest housing and care providers in the UK, with a history going back more than 50 years, we have a duty to do everything we can to help alleviate the housing crisis.

Introduction

Between November 2022 and October 2024, Sanctuary partnered with Renaisi to re-envision the evaluation approach for their **Sustainable Communities** programme.

Renaisi is an organisation that works to strengthen communities across the UK by challenging the root causes of social and economic exclusion. The organisation has been [influential](#) in the development of place-based policy, practice and evaluation in the UK.

The partnership between Sanctuary and Renaisi focused on aligning the evaluation of the Sustainable Communities programme with Sanctuary's strategic objectives of

building **community connection** and **resilience**, where investment is driven by community members, helping them realise aspirations locally; community members develop capacity to drive change for themselves; and learning from supported initiatives feeds into the development and improvement of future work.

The Sustainable Communities programme takes an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, in combination with a trauma-informed approach, and three UN Sustainable Development goals (UNSDGs) – we define these terms towards the [end of this document](#).

The objectives of the partnership were to:

1. Develop a **theory of change** for the programme, situating community connection and resilience within this.

2. **Evaluate** the programme against the theory of change, grounded in familiarity with place-based approaches.

3. Support the design of an **improved evaluation model** aligns with the theory of change ABCD principles and UNSDGs.

Situating community connection and resilience

Through a series of workshops with Sanctuary staff and community stakeholders, Renaisi developed shared definitions of community connection and resilience, integrating these into the design of a **new theory of change** for the programme.

This new theory of change lays out the logic of the programme: how a combination of individual, place- and Sanctuary-level change enables community connection and resilience. It also articulates *how* the ABCD approach works to enable these changes.

Right: the theory of change diagram

Impact

A resilient community is one with the resources, capacity, and confidence to support each other, learn and adapt through change to emerge strong.

Outcomes

Community Connection is people supporting a healthy/thriving community and individual aspirations through building relationships and sharing local knowledge and skills. A connected community has confidence, shared goals and support to realise these.

Individual-level
Breaking cycles of poverty by developing individual community members':
- Ability to affect change in their local area
- Employability and employment
- Digital and financial literacy
- Health and wellbeing

Place-level
Strengthening collective ownership over the local area, supporting:
- A stronger local economy with better employment opportunities
- Higher quality education and training pathways
- Safer and more welcoming public spaces

Sanctuary-level
Sanctuary is better embedded in communities, with social purpose integrated across its work. This builds the profile of social housing providers as an embedded form of community support and catalyst for social change.

Enablers

Understanding
Understanding what the community has
Engaging and co-creating with communities
Gaining trust by showing not telling
Being empathetic
Being relatable, reaching people at their level
Being agile, adaptable, and flexible

Mediating
Brokering relationships with others
Working with the local authority to promote understanding of the local community and what they want at a grassroots level
Supporting community members and groups to connect and collaborate
Keeping outside organisations informed about community members' priorities
Building relationships with other parts of the system/influencing the system

Supporting
Listening
Supporting confidence-building
Being inclusive to all
Managing expectations
Being open and honest
Raising the profile of smaller community groups

Activities

Supporting the community and place
Strengthening connections between residents and place
Creating spaces which benefit residents and the environment
Supporting groups to build capacity
Strength-based approaches to community development

Improving residents' lives
Building life skills (e.g., health, relationships, employment)
Supporting wellbeing
Discovering and sharing aspirations
Accessing food and essentials (cost-of-living response)

Community Assets

Spaces – physical and shared purpose

Community partners

The knowledge and understanding of community members

Sustainable Communities staff

The resilience of individual community members

Improving the evaluation approach

The previous Sustainable Communities evaluation approach did not reflect the focus on place-based change, or ABCD, instead focusing on capturing grantee activities and individual-level change through grantee monitoring and reporting formats. Renaisi and Sanctuary designed and tested new approaches that focused on improving the quality and sustainability of the evaluation, introducing a focus on learning alongside impact measurement.

The Renaisi team designed and launched a **community research** model where insights would be generated by community members and centre their stories. Sanctuary staff and community partners are now trained in community research methods – including training others – and the Renaisi team has supported the piloting of this approach in two priority places.

Renaisi conducted a **review of monitoring and reporting data** collected by Sanctuary between 2021-2023, mapping this against the new theory of change. Through this review, Renaisi produced a series of recommendations for improving approaches to data collection. The Renaisi team also facilitated two workshops with Sustainable Communities team members, **building capabilities to develop a new evaluation framework**, grounded in the theory of change and tied to the UNSDGs. In combination, these activities will enable the Sanctuary team to develop a new evaluation framework the reflects the principles and strategic objectives of the programme.

These visualisations map 2021-2023 Sustainable Communities grant data onto outcome areas articulated in the new theory of change. This analysis demonstrates that existing data collection methods were not designed to explore evidence of change on the level of place or Sanctuary as an organisation.

Individual-level change
The frequency with which individual-level outcomes are recorded across all data sources.

Contributing towards breaking cycles of poverty by developing community members'...

- Knowledge of/access to resources — 8
- Agency in affecting their place — 5
- Social connection — 47
- Feelings of safety — 33

In turn, supporitng their...

- Ability to affect local change — 3
- Employability and employment — 16
- Digital and financial capability — 13
- Health and wellbeing — 82

Emergent outcome areas

- Confidence — 10
- Crisis support/basic needs — 9

Place-level change
The frequency with which place-level outcomes are recorded across all data sources.

Strengthened collective ownership over the local area, leading to...

- Better embedded community knowledge — 3
- Stronger community-led partnerships — 10
- Improved capacity for local groups to access funding — 3

In turn, supporting...

- Stronger local economy — 1
- Higher quality education and training pathways — 0
- Safer and more welcoming public spaces — 2
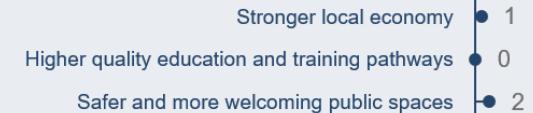
Sanctuary-level change
The frequency with which Sanctuary-level outcomes are recorded across all data sources.

Sanctuary is better embedded in communities, with social purpose integrated across its work. Through their staff team, Sanctuary...

- Develops deeper rooted connections with places — 1
- Builds ability to learn and adapt in conversation — 1
- Improves at signposting to resources — 0

In turn...

- Builds profile of housing proviers as community anchors — 0
- Contributes towards others following an ABCD approach — 0
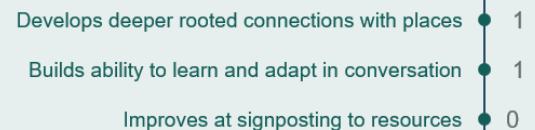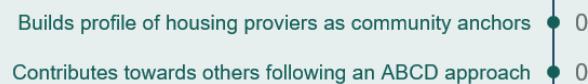
Validating the Sustainable Communities Model

By the end of this partnership, the Renaisi team had conducted fieldwork in three communities, analysed historical data, and developed a close familiarity with the work of the Sustainable Communities team and community partners. This has enabled the Renaisi team to develop a good understanding of the model, and the ways it reflects ABCD and place-based working practices.

The Renaisi team found that the programme's approach to place-based working that was driven by **relational, asset-based practice**. Community organisations and members felt trusted by Sanctuary to know what kind project or initiative would work for them, in turn they felt that Sanctuary played an active and supportive role.

For example, community connectors provided specialist capabilities to support the development of community work or advocated alongside community members to external power holders. Sanctuary plays the role of a community anchor, embedded within rather than sitting outside of a community, providing consistent resource and technical support, while supporting communities to lead their own approaches. This model of doing by/with communities sets it apart from those still operating a for/to approach to community engagement. At the same time, there are limitations with the programme, for instance, current resource levels mean that it is not possible to offer the programme in all locations.

Quotes from Renaisi's research

*"I do think it's all about **trust and relationships**. We know people's names, people open up to us, and we can help them and support them"*

*"People are **taking ownership** of what they want in their area. I would definitely say it's a thriving, resilient community"*

*"[Sanctuary are] very supportive of what we do, in fact I consider myself an **extended member of their team"***

*"Before, people would sit back and want everything done for them, but now with the [ABCD approach], they've turned that on their heads to say 'well, it's your community, you tell us what you want, you take control' so you have more confidence and **people taking ownership"***

Acknowledging variation in the maturity of the ABCD approach across Sustainable Communities places, Renaisi assesses the programme as one that supports **connected** and **mutual** place-based change, as defined by Renaisi's [place-based systemic change model](#).

The improved evaluation approach should help gather data more targeted towards exploring the enablers, outcomes and learnings from the Sustainable Communities model.

Place-based Systemic Change Framework
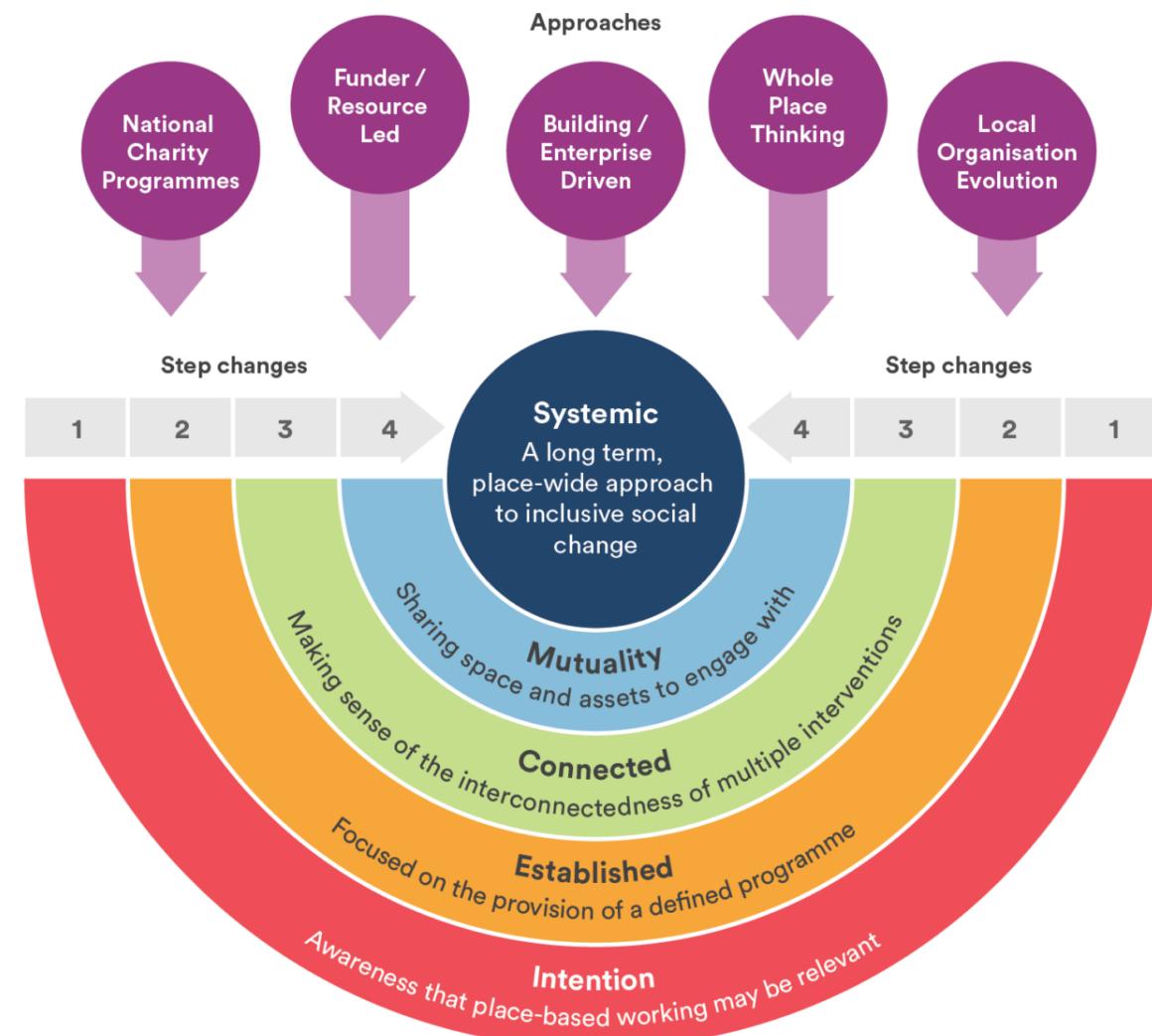
Concluding reflection

This partnership has demonstrated the strengths of the Sustainable Communities model and enabled a stronger, more principles-aligned evaluation approach. The Sustainable Communities team will continue this work through expanding and improving the community research pilots and re-designing the programme evaluation framework. The programme theory remains a living thing, to be tested through the ongoing analysis of data and updated in line with learnings and developing approaches and conditions in places.

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Glossary

Asset-based community development (ABCD): an approach to sustainable community-driven development based on the premise that communities can drive development by identifying and mobilising existing strengths (definition adapted from Nurture Development).

UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs): a set of goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and work towards peace and prosperity. The UNSDGs were designed for use by national government, but they are widely used by corporate and social sector organisations to articulate social impact ambitions.

Trauma-informed practice (TIP): working with people in ways that are grounded in an understanding of how trauma impacts a person's neurological, biological, psychological and social development. Principles of TIP articulated by the Office for Health Improvement & Disparities are: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural consideration.

Place-based change: Renaisi defines place-based change as a long-term approach to identifying, understanding, and addressing social issues. It harnesses the resource, expertise and experience from a defined area and uses them collectively to enable change.

Get in touch

We want this report to be accessible to all. If you would like access to an alternative format, or if you would like to continue the conversation, email cathy.hearn@renaisi.com.

Sanctuary

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