

# Evaluation of the Building Blocks service

---

**Demonstrating the 'soft skills' approach to community health, wellbeing and social inclusion**

New Wortley Community Centre

Published: June 2023

# Contents

## Executive summary

---

- Key findings and success factors 2
- Recommendations 4

## Background and context

---

- Aims of the evaluation 5
- New Wortley Community Centre 5
- The local community 6
- Building Blocks project 6
- Map of support linking to and from Building Blocks 7

## Evaluation framework

---

- Aims of the project 8
- Methodology 9

## Findings

---

- New Wortley Community Centre membership 11
- Equality monitoring 12
- Findings by outcome 16
- Wider findings: what works well 28
- Wider findings: areas for growth 35

## Recommendations 39

---

# Executive Summary

Building Blocks is a project of New Wortley Community Centre that aims to listen to local people in LS12 and surrounding areas, building on strengths and interests to help people achieve what they want to in a way that benefits the whole community.

The aim of this evaluation is to assess the impact of Building Blocks, review progress against the intended outcomes, and identify any unintended outcomes or wider effects it has had outside of its original scope.

## Key findings and success factors

New Wortley Community Centre is **successful in targeting support** to residents living in LS12 and the surrounding areas. People accessing Building Blocks reported a **significant improvement in each of the intended outcome areas** (between 1.6 and 3 points improvement).

- Building Blocks allows people to build their **social networks and relationships** through:
  - Encouraging a sense of community ownership, for example through volunteer-led groups
  - Creating an inclusive and welcoming environment
- New Wortley Community Centre provides fitness-based activities that people enjoy and use to both **stay active and socialise**. Building Blocks is particularly successful in engaging and supporting people with disabilities or long term health conditions, as well as their wider support networks such as family and carers, and enabling them to self-manage their condition more effectively.
- Although on average, people saw the least improvement in their ability to manage money through Building Blocks, a key success of the project is in **supporting people with money and food resilience in a non-stigmatising way** and alongside wider support, providing a 'wrap around' service that fills gaps in basic welfare state provision.

- Building Blocks utilises a light-touch, but effective approach to support people into **employment, volunteering and training** through:
  - Active listening, letting an individual describe what they enjoy doing and what they feel is stopping them from progressing
  - Resources to remove barriers, for example transport to college
  - Resources to build on strengths, for example starting a volunteer-led bike maintenance group
  
- Building Blocks provides effective **low to medium level mental health support** to those who may not engage or find success with statutory services, through:
  - A non-clinical community setting
  - Flexible, ongoing support that is not time-limited
  - Peer-led setting, such as activity groups, where people feel less pressured to talk and can gradually build up confidence
  
- **Active listening and a supportive, motivational approach** from staff is crucial in taking an asset-based approach, and effective in building people's trust, self-esteem and raising their aspirations.
  
- Through Building Blocks and by responding to local need, New Wortley Community Centre has developed a space that is **welcoming and inclusive** of culturally diverse communities by:
  - Ensuring culturally diverse communities are better represented within their workforce, including volunteers
  - Educating the wider community through the universal language of food
  - Providing a link between culturally diverse communities and statutory services, e.g. schools
  
- Building Blocks is effective in supporting **people who may not engage with statutory services, or** who may need a different kind of support through:
  - Maintaining a flexible, 'drop-in' service
  - Building up trust and a reputation with communities as an organisation that was separate and independent from statutory services

## Recommendations

- **Encourage members to try new activities** and groups to expand their social network, for example through a buddying system or through joint group events.
- **Explore delivering further fitness classes** and accessing gym equipment for people to use in a community setting, and where particular groups (such as carers and parents) can make use of other services at the same time.
- **Explore ways to further embed active listening** and motivational approach across the staff and volunteer team, particularly with those who are new to the team.
- **Explore ways to make information available in different languages and formats**
- **Build on the cultural café model** to explore new ways to introduce members of the community to different cultures and norms.
- **Invest in small amounts of targeted monitoring** to continue drawing out evidence on what is working well and areas for growth going forward
- **Continue investing in partnerships** to:
  - Close the feedback loop and let partners know about the impact of their referrals
  - Expand reach whilst maintaining focus on local need

There were also two key tensions identified through the evaluation for New Wortley Community Centre to consider and explore their position on:

1. There is a balance to be explored between stretching resources to address some of the root causes of issues that affect the wider area of West Leeds and beyond; and providing hyper-local, sustainable services solely in New Wortley.

2. There is also balance to be considered between maintaining a flexible drop-in service, with the clear benefits this brings to communities who may not engage with a statutory or “mainstream” services, and developing and strengthening systems for capturing, reviewing and sharing learning, which requires more data collection and therefore more structure.

# Background and context

## Aims of the evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide an independent view of the value of the Building Blocks service to its key stakeholders, and to make recommendations to inform the future direction of the work and its sustainability.

The aims of this evaluation of Building Blocks are to:

- assess the effectiveness and understand the impact of the approach taken;
- identify barriers, facilitators and impact for people using the service;
- review progress against the intended outcomes; and
- identify “unintended” or “unexpected” impacts of Building Blocks activity and analyse its potential to influence change outside of its core scope (“trickle-down effect” and opportunities for growth / further development).

## New Wortley Community Centre

New Wortley Community Centre is a community-owned centre with a café, a main hall to hire and outdoor space including a bike shed. The centre is open throughout the week and regularly hosts community events either within the centre or elsewhere in New Wortley.

The centre is managed by the New Wortley Community Association, a local group of residents and people working to improve the lives of people living in LS12, employs 15 staff and supports a large number of volunteers on a regular basis. The community centre provides a wide range of support, services and activities to the local community both from within the centre, and with outreach activity across several neighbouring areas.

## The local community

The local community refers to people living in and around New Wortley. In 2014, Leeds City Council Public Health team conducted a comprehensive study of New Wortley and found that it was one of the most deprived areas in Leeds, with the health of people living in the area characterised by “high levels of chronic conditions including cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, chronic kidney disease, cancer, HIV, obesity, and poor mental health.” The Health Needs Assessment was updated in 2020 and found that although there had been some improvements, health inequalities remained high.

The population of the New Wortley area is predominantly young, with few older people. The ethnic mix is largely white, with less than 30% of the population from BME groups. Life expectancy for both males and females is lower than the England average. Deprivation levels in the area are some of the highest seen in Leeds and the United Kingdom.” [1]

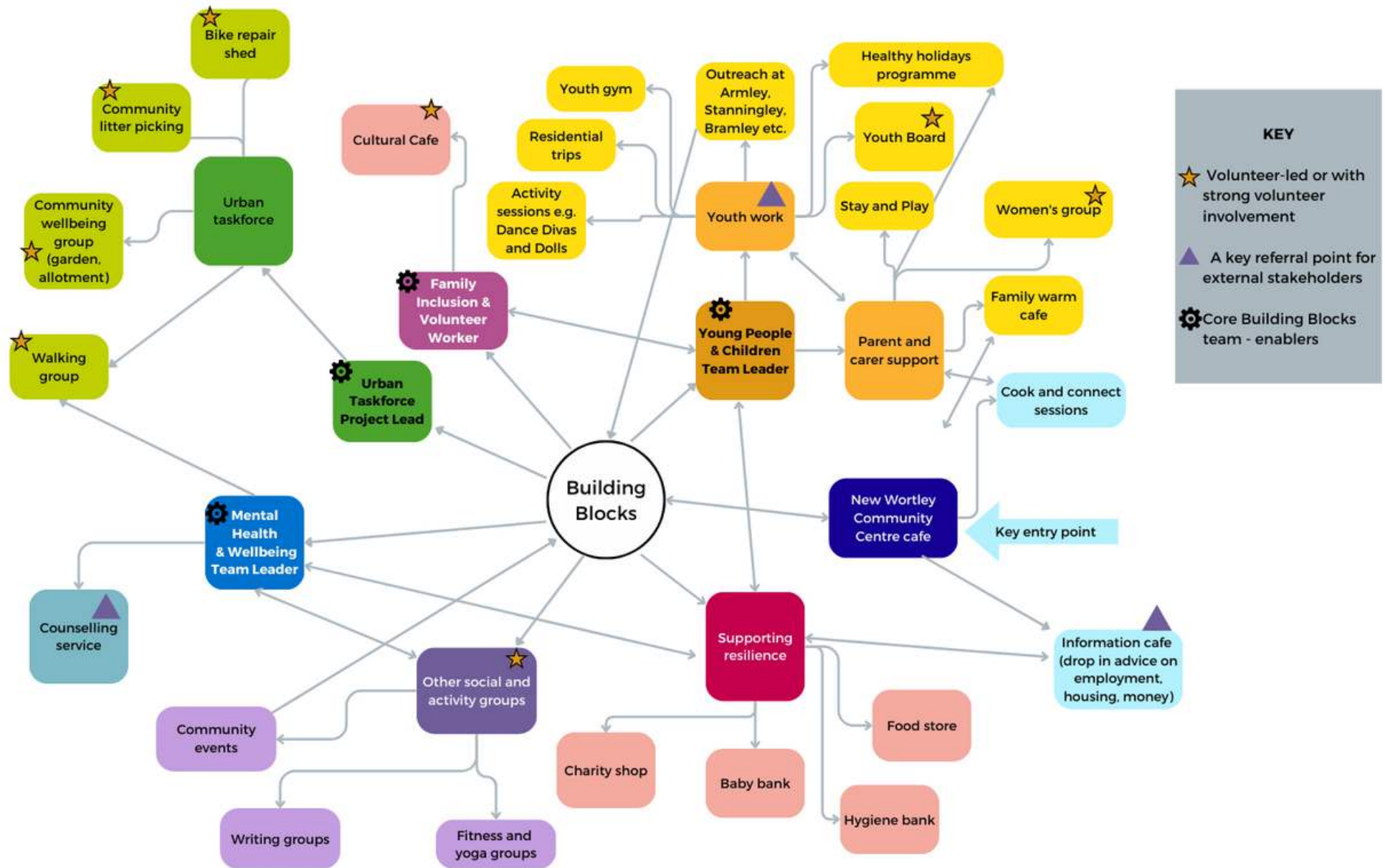
## Building Blocks project

Building Blocks is an integral service to New Wortley Community Centre, providing the opportunity for anyone accessing the centre to sit down and talk to a member of the team about their current situation and where they would like to move towards. The NWCC team will then set an individual plan with the person based upon their aspirations, talents and interests as well as any barriers they may be experiencing. They provide support on an individual basis and by linking into relevant projects or support that is run through the centre, or in some cases will refer people to external services.

This service has been funded for five years through the National Lottery, and provides the core for the majority of the activity at New Wortley Community Centre. The diagram below shows the myriad of support, services and activities connected through Building Blocks and some of the links between them. Groups and services are borne from the interest of people who access Building Blocks, who are then encouraged and supported (often with funding) as a volunteer to start a group for others to join.

[1] Health Needs Assessment 2020 Our Place: A Profile of New Wortley [Health Needs Assessment 2020 Our Place: A Profile of New Wortley](#)

# Map of support linking to and from Building Blocks





## How Building Blocks works

Building Blocks is a project that applies the asset-based approach which is core to New Wortley Community Centre. An asset-based approach means looking at an individual's strengths and works well in a person's life and building on this, rather than starting with what is missing or 'wrong' with them.

Building Blocks is primarily a way of linking people to the support they need in order to achieve what they want to in a way that is right for them. Although for many people, Building Blocks is the first service they access when going to New Wortley Community Centre for the first time, it is not simply a first point of contact – many people link back into Building Blocks several times.

For example, someone could come into NWCC because they are looking for food support, and be linked in to the food store or provided with an emergency food parcel. Later, they might access Building Blocks again and explain they have lost their job and want to work in catering. Through Building Blocks, they might receive support with CV writing, be supported to volunteer at the café or access food hygiene training. Other people use the Building Blocks service consistently throughout their time going to New Wortley Community Centre – it is the essential thread running throughout services at the centre

# Evaluation framework

## Aims of the project

The intended outcomes for people accessing support through Building Blocks are:

- Improving people's social networks and relationships
- Improving people's ability to keep themselves well and healthy
- Improving people's ability to manage their own money effectively
- Increasing the time that people spend on meaningful activities, including those that lead into employment and volunteering
- Improving people's emotional health and wellbeing

These outcomes, along with the wider mission of New Wortley Community Centre are in line with other local stakeholders, for example Leeds City Council's Priority Neighbourhood aims for New Wortley:

### **Outcome 1 - Children and Young People**

- To ensure all young people in New Wortley are engaged, have a voice and are not drawn into crime or ASB.

### **Outcome 2 - Community Voice**

- Ensuring residents are central to developing solutions to local issues, helping to build an enterprising and confident community.

### **Outcome 3 - Employment, Skills and Welfare**

- Improve pathways to employment for those furthest away from the job market.

### **Outcome 4 - Health and Wellbeing**

- To assist in delivering the 3ps for a healthy life · People · Purpose · Place
- To encourage local people to move more and sit less by increasing easy access to free and fun physical activity.

### **Outcome 5 - Safer, Cleaner, Greener**

- Improve the physical environment by making it greener.
- Increase community confidence by partnership working and better crime reporting, specifically local drug activity.

## **Methodology**

This evaluation employed a mixed methodology, drawing on a range of data collected both internally by the organisation and during the evaluation. Data was collected primarily in relation to the intended outcomes of Building Blocks, but semi-structured interviews were used to ensure that participants could share their experiences in full and to draw out any unintended impacts of the service.

Qualitative data was collected using the following methods:

- Three focus groups with people who have used the service were held, including a total of 23 participants. Participants were asked about their experiences accessing the service, the impact it had and their views on the service. Focus groups were held during regular project activity
  - a walking group,
  - a shared meal with the cultural café volunteers,
  - a women's activity group whilst participants were crocheting etc.
- Semi-structured interviews with five members of staff to understand their role within the Building Blocks, and their perceptions of the impact, strengths and limitations of the service,
- Semi-structured interviews with three external stakeholders to understand their role in relation to Building Blocks, if and how they refer people, and their perceptions of the impact, strengths and limitations of the service. These stakeholders included a social prescribing link worker from a local GP, link workers in local schools and community centres, and key staff from Armley Helping Hands (a neighboring third sector organisation with strong links to New Wortley Community Centre).
- An online (Microsoft Forms) and paper-based questionnaire for people using the service with a total of 11 responses received.

Quantitative data provided by New Wortley Community Centre was reviewed and summarised. To supplement this, additional data was collected:

- Equality monitoring data: this was collected from focus group participants and from people who responded to our survey
- Outcome stars[2]: this was collected from focus group participants through discussions led by the focus group facilitator, and from people who responded to our survey

The following open data sources were also used in this evaluation:

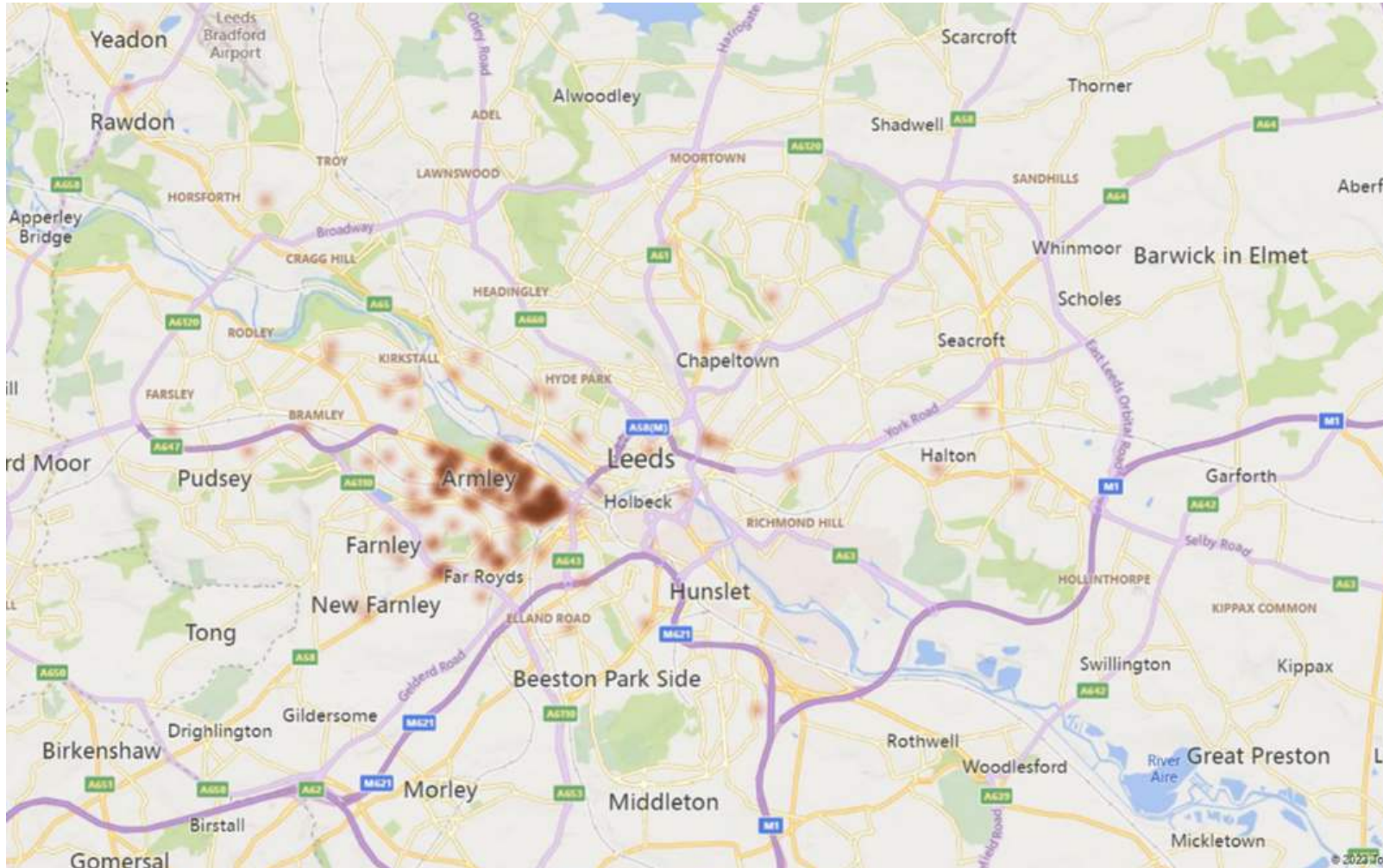
- 2021 Census data
- Health Needs Assessment 2020 Our Place: A Profile of New Wortley

We have used thematic analysis to draw out evidence to assess the effectiveness and understand the impact of the approach taken against its intended outcomes, to identify any unintended impacts, strengths and areas for growth.

[2] An outcome star is a collaborative evaluation tool that allows service users to measure how they feel they have progressed in different aspects, using number rating to show where they felt they are at the start of an intervention, and complete this again after a period of time to compare.

# Findings

## New Wortley Community Centre membership



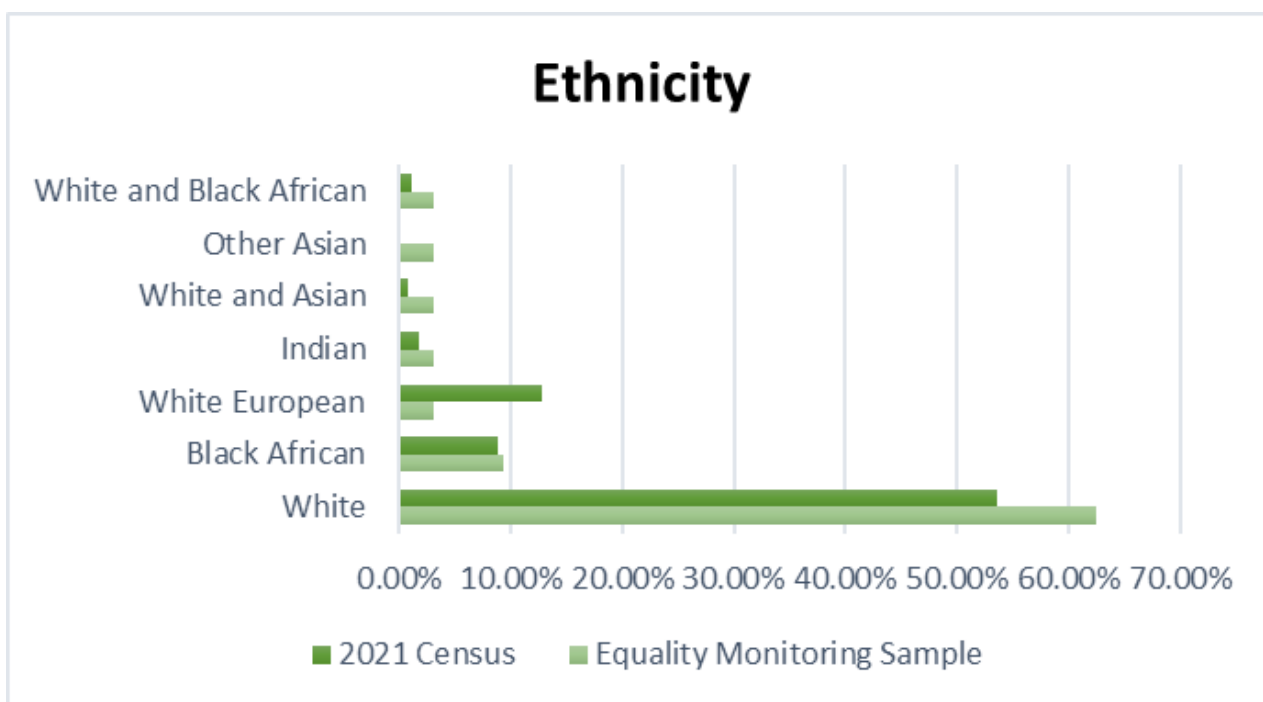
## Equality Monitoring

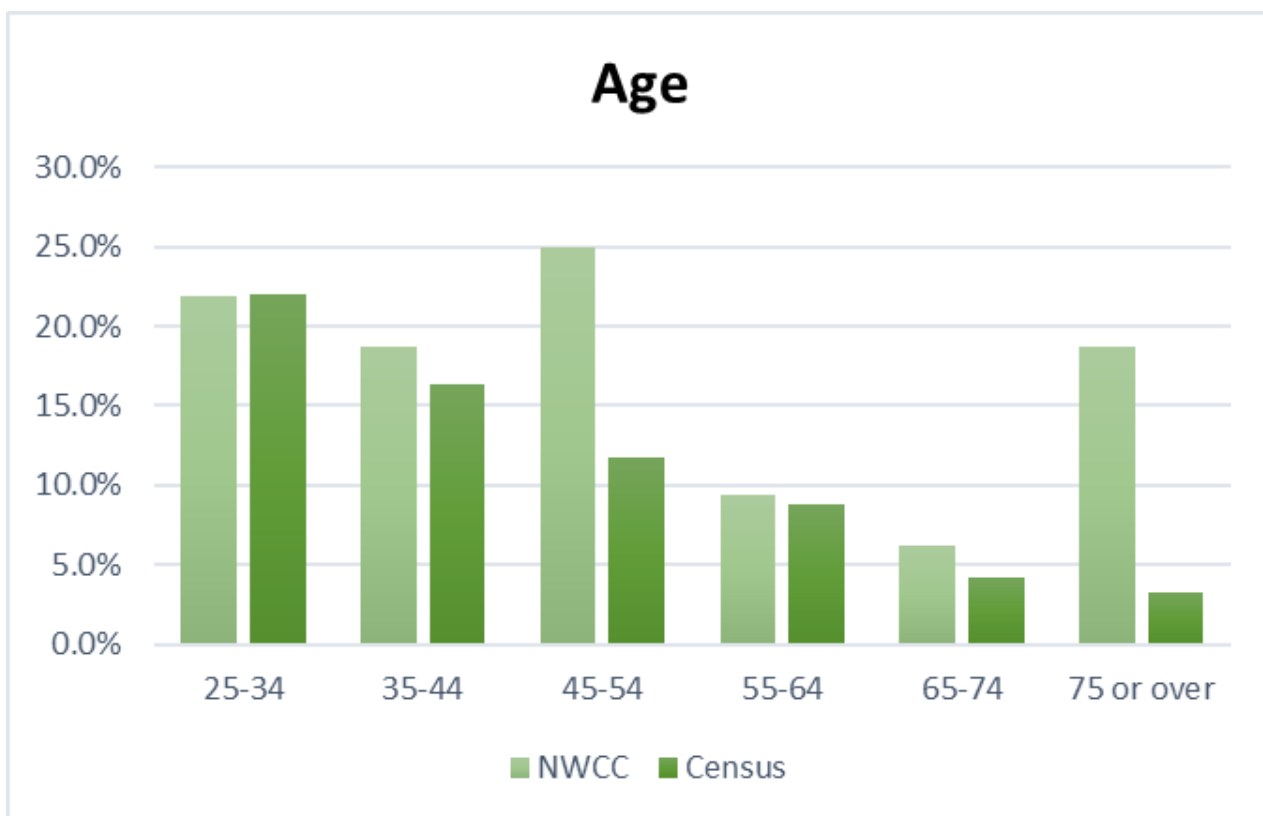
Equality monitoring data was collected from the three focus groups (23 participants) and 11 survey responses. This sample is not truly representative of the people that access Building Blocks, as not all of these people go on to participate in groups or attend the centre regularly. However, as the three focus groups took place with existing groups and their regular attendees, this sample gives an indicative picture of the people accessing Building Blocks.

One of the key differences between the population of New Wortley and the sample of people that we spoke to was that people in our sample had a much higher rate of disability or long term health condition (LTHC). This shows that Building Blocks has been successful in engaging and targeting support for people with long term health needs.

We heard from one women’s group and one men’s group as part of our focus groups. However, one of the men’s groups had allowed people from other genders to participate. This may account for the slightly higher rate of people who identified as women in our sample.

The below graphs compare the equality monitoring data from our evaluation sample at NWCC with the latest available UK Census data gathered for the Armley ward in 2021:



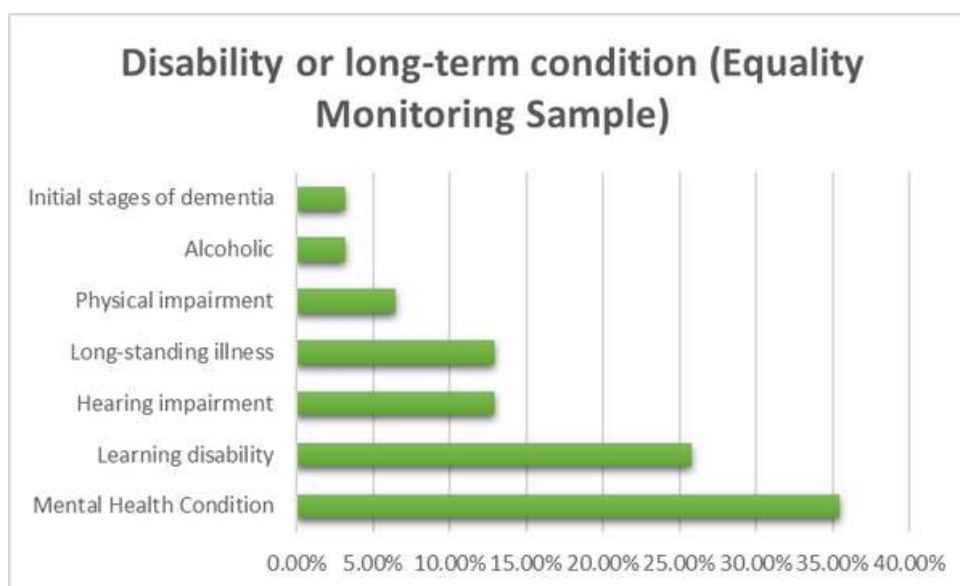
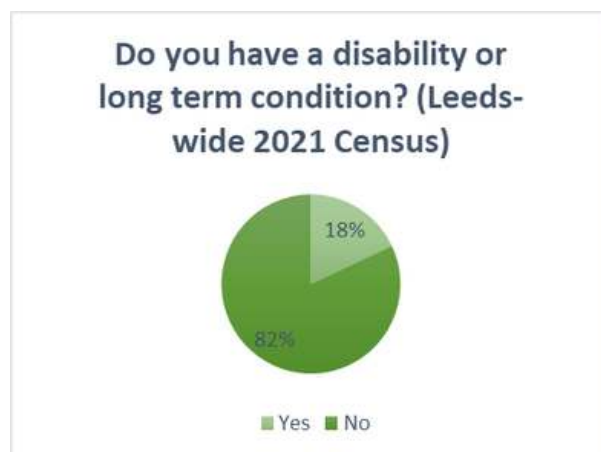
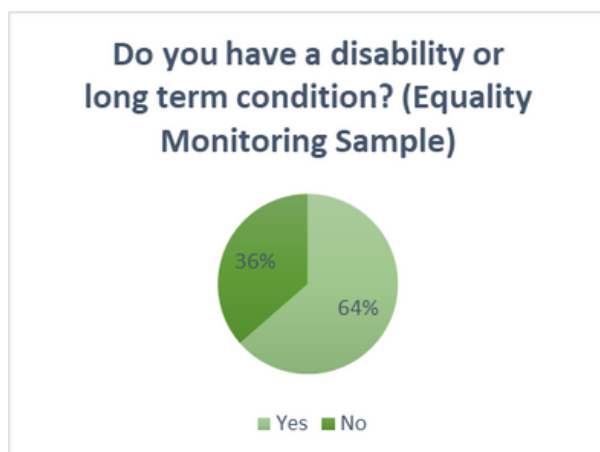


Our focus groups were selected randomly, and did not include anyone under the age of 25. Therefore, the equality monitoring data that we have gathered is not entirely representative of those who regularly attend groups and activities at NWCC. Staff at NWCC feel that activities and support for 18-25 year olds may be an area for growth.

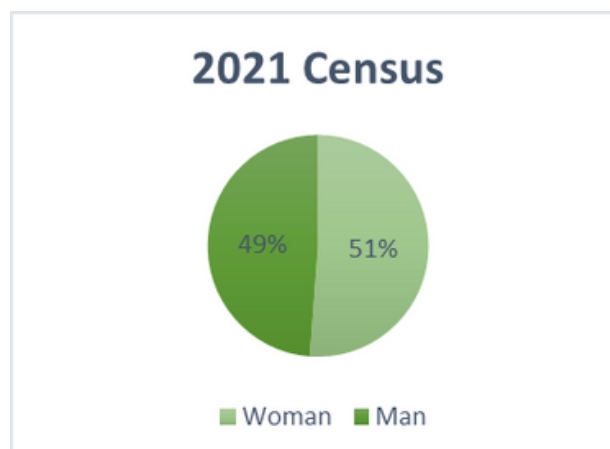
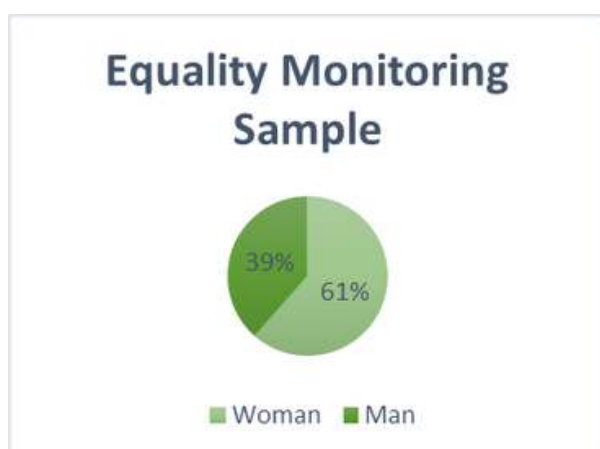
Staff at New Wortley Community Centre feel that their main service user group are working age adults who, with the exception of 25-34 year olds, are over-represented in the above graph when compared to the 2021 census.

Older people (over 75) are also heavily over-represented in the equality monitoring data. Older people who come into NWCC and engage with Building Blocks are typically referred to a partner organisation such as Armley Helping Hands if they require more in-depth support, as this is Armley Helping Hands specialism. Although older people are not the main service user group for Building Blocks, many older people continue to attend activity groups at NWCC.

## Disability



## Gender



## Findings by outcome

We asked focus group participants and survey respondents to complete an outcome star, rating themselves out of ten in different areas at the point that they first came into New Wortley Community Centre, in comparison to now. This allows us to gain some understanding of the distance travelled in each of the outcome areas.

Aside from being an effective evaluation tool to measure service user progress, completing the outcome stars data is a useful for staff to identify priority areas where people at New Wortley feel they require development or would like to focus on.

The table below shows the average difference between how people in our sample rated themselves when they first came into NWCC and accessed support through Building Blocks, and how they would rate themselves against each of these areas now (as recorded in March 2023).

Outcome	Average rating at first visit	Average rating now	Difference
Social networks and relationships	4.7	7.7	3
Looking after yourself (health)	5.3	7.7	2.4
Managing money	6.3	7.9	1.6
Spending your time well	5.4	7.5	2.1
Emotional health and wellbeing	5.1	7.5	2.4
Your goals in life	5.2	8.2	3

We asked the people who participated in focus groups how they thought their lives might be different if they had not come to New Wortley Community Centre. The key themes from people's responses were that their mental health would be poorer, they would have less friends and people to support them, and that they would generally be struggling. Some people told us they didn't think they would still be here without the community centre. During the course of the Building Blocks project so far, residents in LS12 have experienced the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (with many being confined to high rise apartments with no



outdoor space during lockdown) and the impacts of the ongoing cost of living crisis. It is likely that without the support of New Wortley Community Centre, with Building Blocks as a central tenet, local communities would have struggled significantly.

The table above shows that on average, people felt they had improved by around 2 points on each of the outcomes, indicating significant change.

Stronger Families is a local programme in Leeds with similar intended outcomes around whole family support to improve mental health and wellbeing, parenting skills, CV support and employment training, and debt relief support. Outcome stars from people who accessed support through Stronger Families show that 55% felt their wellbeing had improved by 2 points or more[3]. In our sample of people who had accessed support through Building Blocks, 67% felt their emotional health and wellbeing had improved by 2 points or more.

**Key finding:** People accessing Building Blocks reported a significant improvement in each of the intended outcome areas (between 1.6 and 3 points improvement).

Building Blocks had the most impact on people's social networks and relationships, and in raising their aspirations. The smallest impact Building Blocks had was on people's ability to manage their money, although in an area of high deprivation, there is limited scope to increase people's overall income.

[3] Stronger Families Impact Assessment, June 2021:  
<https://www.learningpartnerships.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Stronger-Families-Impact-Assessment-June-2021.pdf>

## Improving people's social networks and relationships

On average, people rated their social networks 3.0 points higher on the outcome star in comparison to when they first came into New Wortley Community Centre (and therefore Building Blocks). One of the most significant improvements was against this outcome.

Several people we spoke to talked about new friends they had made through different groups at New Wortley Community Centre, and many had brought existing friends and family along to groups:

Volunteers at the Cultural Café talked about the social connections they had developed since coming to the community centre. Several volunteers had started attending ESOL classes at a local college together, and volunteers saw each other socially outside of the cultural café. The volunteers had provided the catering at one of the volunteers' wedding, and another had invited all the volunteers to her baby's christening.

***"I don't feel as if I have any friends so coming here was lovely. Everyone was so kind and supportive and I got a lot out of my system." (Focus group)***

***"I really enjoy art and creating things...I was shy when I first came here and couldn't really talk to anybody, but it really helped having other people there that I could draw with." (Focus group)***

### **Case study: Elsa's story**

Elsa is deaf and experiences anxiety and depression. She was referred for counselling at New Wortley Community Centre, but did not attend the first few appointments as she was a carer for her mother and grandmother and had a lot to manage. Elsa was very isolated and withdrawn, but began seeing a counsellor and felt able to talk more about her situation and her aspirations for the future. (cont.)

(Case study continued...)

The team at New Wortley Community Centre supported her to access Personal Independence Payments (PIP), which she had not been able to access when she had applied previously, and to apply to college to gain qualifications in Maths and English. Elsa also started volunteering at the café in NWCC, and felt more independent and confident.

**Key finding:** Building Blocks allows people to build their social networks and relationships through:

- Encouraging a sense of community ownership, for example through volunteer-led groups
- Encouraging people to bring friends and family to the centre, even if they don't live in the local area
- Creating an inclusive and welcoming environment
- This in turn supports progress in other outcome areas, particularly emotional health and wellbeing.

**Recommendation:** Encourage members to try new activities and groups to expand their social network, for example through a buddying system or through joint group events.

## Improving people's ability to keep themselves well and healthy

On average, people rated their ability to keep themselves well and healthy 2.4 points higher on the outcome star now in comparison to when they first came into New Wortley Community Centre (and therefore Building Blocks).

Some of the volunteers told us that they had wanted to start doing more exercise when they first came into the community centre.

When we asked people in focus groups about what else they would like to see happening at New Wortley Community Centre, one of the most common answers was more fitness classes, outdoor activities, or a community gym where

they could exercise with people they knew and felt comfortable with (we particularly heard this from women from culturally diverse communities). Although staff members told us that starting new fitness-based activities and encouraging people to get involved with these has had limited success in the past, members of the new cultural café were particularly interested in this. Many of the café volunteers attend yoga and gym classes together already.

63.6% of the people using New Wortley Community Centre that we spoke to as part of this evaluation had a disability or long-term health condition, and many people talked to us about their condition, their experiences with different health services, and how New Wortley Community Centre helped them to self-manage conditions.

For example, one of the focus group members had been seriously ill and hospitalised with COVID-19 and consequently suffered long term impacts on his physical and mental health. He felt that the regular exercise and social interaction with the walking group aided his recovery and he values his ongoing participation.

One volunteer, Siobhan, was disabled and has several long term health conditions. She lives very close to the centre so it's easy for her to visit, and it gives her husband, who is also her carer a break which she feels is good for him.

29% of the people we spoke to and collected equality monitoring data from were unpaid carers, which is significantly higher than the 9% of the UK population estimated to be providing unpaid care [4]. This suggests that Building Blocks is successful in reaching and supporting unpaid carers, which in turn will support better outcomes for the person they care for.

**Key finding:** New Wortley Community Centre provides fitness-based activities that people enjoy and use to both stay active and socialise. Building Blocks is particularly successful in engaging and supporting people with disabilities or long term health conditions, as well as their wider support networks such as family and carers, and enabling them to self-manage their condition more effectively.

**Recommendation:** Explore delivering further fitness classes and accessing gym equipment for people to use in a community setting, and where particular groups (such as carers and parents) can make use of other services at the same time.

[4] Carers UK, Carers Week 2022 research report: <https://www.carersuk.org/policy-and-research/key-facts-and-figures/>

## Improving people's ability to manage their own money effectively

On average, people rated their ability to manage their own money effectively 1.6 points higher on the outcome star now in comparison to when they first came into New Wortley Community Centre (and therefore Building Blocks). This was the outcome that showed the smallest improvement, and that had the highest initial score – people scored themselves on average at 6.3 out of 10 in managing their money before they came to the community centre.

During the course of the evaluation, we observed several people who took part in the focus groups using the charity shop and food pantry, although they didn't mention the value of these services during the focus groups. This could be due to perceived stigma around using services relating to financial support, such as the food store, which may have also affected how they rated their ability to manage money in the outcome star exercise.

New Wortley is an area of high deprivation: 48.9% of children under the age of 16 grow up in low-income households, and in 2017, 12.3% of residents were experiencing fuel poverty<sup>[5]</sup> – a statistic that is unfortunately sure to have increased in recent years.

Noting the apparent mismatch between participants self-reporting of their money management skills and their use of emergency food service the evaluation team reasoned that it was probable that Building Blocks users with low incomes need to be skilled in money management in order to cover daily expenditure. However, people living on low incomes are also more severely impacted by external factors, such as increases in utility costs or unexpected bills. One of the key benefits of Building Blocks is that people can access food support and other services related to money at the same time as coming along to a craft group or counselling sessions. This makes the support more accessible and reduces stigma around accessing them.

***“We've introduced warm space and we've tagged that on to a lot of our sessions now.” (Staff member)***

**[5] Health Needs Assessment 2020 Our Place: A Profile of New Wortley**

***“They get provided a hot meal, whether that's beans on toast to sausage and mash, they get provided something. I think parents are quite appreciative of that because obviously they've got Breakfast Club, they're going into school for their lunch and then coming to us and getting a hot meal. And so I think parents have said, that's one less day that they have to think about.” (Staff member)***

***“When I was having the baby, I have no money to buy baby things. I knew I was pregnant, but the money is a bit difficult for me and the baby bank was there. Before I didn't know about it. I have just had him [older child] and nobody said anything to me, not even my GP.” (Focus group)***

### **Case study: Neil's story**

Neil was referred to NWCC by his GP, and when he first came into the centre was seeking food support as he had not eaten anything substantial for two weeks. Neil was able to access an emergency food parcel from the community centre and food bank vouchers.

Neil was employed full time, but had gotten into debt with funeral costs after deaths in his family. Through Building Blocks, staff supported Neil to explain his financial situation and through a referral to Money Buddies, helped to access debt support.

A few days later, Neil felt able to return to the community centre and explain that he was struggling with his mental health, self harming and feeling suicidal. Staff booked Neil a GP appointment, and he was then referred for counselling at the centre. Neil had been struggling to maintain his working pattern due to his anxiety and depression and was under observation at work for sickness absence. Through counselling, he was supported to speak to his employers about his mental health and wellbeing and found his employer was very understanding and supportive. This alleviated some of Neil's anxiety and enabled him to continue working.

Neil started to do some volunteer driving for the community centre and this has continued. He finds this helps him to “feel useful” and improves his mental health and wellbeing.

**Key finding:** Although on average, people saw the least improvement in their ability to manage money through Building Blocks, a key success of the project is in supporting people with money and food resilience in a non-stigmatising way and alongside wider support, providing a 'wrap around' service that fills gaps in basic welfare state provision.

## Increasing the time that people spend on meaningful activities, including those that lead into employment and volunteering

On average, people rated their ability to spend their time well 2.1 points higher on the outcome star now in comparison to when they first came into New Wortley Community Centre (and therefore Building Blocks).

As part of the focus groups, we asked people about what they envisaged their future involvement with New Wortley Community Centre to be. Every participant said they wanted to continue coming into the centre. Many people talked about their own aspirations for the future, such as opening a restaurant, having children, or going to university. These people all talked about how important it was to them to continue coming into New Wortley Community Centre, and how essential they felt this was in supporting them to achieve their aspiration – either through 1:1 advice and guidance with staff members, or through support from their peers in groups. On average, people rated their goals and aspirations 3.0 points higher now in comparison with when they first came to New Wortley Community Centre.

***“I really like how they handle their volunteers as well. It seems like they are very much part of the staff team” (External stakeholder)***

***“(the group) helps gets me out of my house and outside...when I’m inside my flat for quite a long time I start to feel trapped... I think if (New Wortley) wasn’t here it would be damaging for a lot of people” (Focus group)***

***“NWCC has had a huge impact on my life from attending women's group as recommended by my doctor to getting a job” (Survey response)***

The asset-based approach that the Building Blocks project takes is effective in supporting people to move closer to volunteering, training or employment by building on their strengths and what they already enjoy doing. Often, the issues that people initially were looking for support with were also barriers to them accessing employment or training, for example language skills or immigration paperwork. Understanding people's individual strengths and aspirations, and encouraging them to try new things, often led to those people finding work or training themselves.

### **Case study: family cooking class**

In February 2023, NWCC ran a family cooking session class for six weeks, where parents came to learn different cooking techniques and recipes for eating more vegetables on a budget, and children could stay and help too. At the end of the six weeks, participants who completed the course received a free slow cooker. However, by the end of the six-week course, three of the five participants had moved from being unemployed into a paid job or training. Although this wasn't the intended outcome of the course, staff found that parents had questions about other courses and training, claiming Universal Credit, writing a CV after taking a break from work to raise a child etc., and this supported helped them into work or training.

"They started socializing a bit more. They started saying, right, well how do I do this, my daughters coming up to three, can you look at my CV, what do you suggest? So we said yeah, let's look at what you have learned over the past three years. You know, you might not have had a job, but you've definitely upskilled your timekeeping and this and that."

Children who had been coming along to the sessions with their parents also started trying new foods and expanding the variety in their diets.

"One little boy said 'can we have that spag bol again that you showed my mum out to make.' [His mum] turned round and said that her son point-blank refused to have veg before, but we blended every bit of veg that you could think of and made the sauce from scratch and that's what she's been making at home."



**Key finding:** Building Blocks utilises a light-touch, but effective approach to support people into employment, volunteering and training through:

- Active listening, letting an individual describe what they enjoy doing and what they feel is stopping them from progressing
- Resources to remove barriers, for example transport to college
- Resources to build on strengths, for example starting a volunteer-led bike maintenance group

## Improving people's emotional health and wellbeing

In 2010, the Leeds City Council Public health team audit of suicides in Leeds showed that the highest number of recorded deaths was in the LS12 area[6]. Suicide and poor mental health continues to be an urgent issue in this area, and much of New Wortley Community Centre's work has been designed to support communities to address this. For example:

- Local GP practices can refer people directly to receive counselling support at New Wortley Community Centre. This takes place in a non-clinical setting and can take place over a longer period of time than the 6-weeks that people can access through other NHS routes.
- The walking group was previously a men's walking group, set up to encourage men living in the high-rise tower blocks (where suicide rates were highest) to walk together and talk about what was happening in their lives.

On average, people rated their emotional health and wellbeing 2.4 points higher on the outcome star now in comparison to when they first came into New Wortley Community Centre (and therefore Building Blocks).

35.5% of the people we spoke to as part of this evaluation had a mental health condition.

[6] Health Needs Assessment 2020 Our Place: A Profile of New Wortley

***“She brought me there [activity group] and I was so scared to walk into a room full of people that you don't know. They're all talking, laughing and, you know, moving around, it just feels like you want to just curl up because you're scared. [...] Once you get to talking to them and get to know them they do make you feel welcome.”***  
***(Focus group)***

***“But it is good to talk to people going through the same thing as you. It's got me a little bit more like my old self.”*** ***(Focus group)***

***“When you've been coming [to an activity group] for a while, you open up like a clam shell. When I first got here I didn't say hello, don't say anything. But once I've been coming here a while I feel as if I'm in a club, that you just get me.”*** ***(Focus group)***

***“It can physically damage you, stress. But this, a community means for me a hospital [...] it's like medicine here.”*** ***(Focus group)***

### **Case study: Matthew's story**

Matthew first came into New Wortley Community Centre after he had been referred by his GP.

Both of Matthew's parents had died and his marriage had broken down. He was working seven days a week and had been caring for his mother, who has Alzheimer's, before she died. His mental health deteriorated rapidly and he had what he described as a “mental breakdown.”

“My head and my body just went ‘that's it!’ and I just laid out in the doctors' car park. I just couldn't function.”

Matthew was then admitted to hospital for six weeks to undergo treatment. When he came out of hospital, he described himself as “very vulnerable,” but started going to New Wortley Community Centre, where he felt immediately welcome and started seeing a counsellor.

Matthew's improvement was gradual and not linear: although he has been coming to the community centre for seven years, it's only in the last year and a half that he has started to feel “human again.”

(Case study cont.) He frequently struggled with his mental health during this period, and was at times suicidal.

Matthew felt that he could speak to the staff and volunteers at New Wortley Community Centre in a way that he couldn't with a doctor: "[The staff] ask you if you're alright – and no, I don't feel right today. And they ask why? What's wrong? They'd ask. Whereas when you went there [the GP] it was hard work, you had to come and explain why your life felt like it did, but in a ten-minute appointment, you just left feeling let down."

Matthew also started volunteering at NWCC, and gradually spent more time doing this – he told us: "the more I volunteer, the better I feel." When we met Matthew, he had just finished teaching a woodwork class, and for the rest of the week was delivering food to elderly residents, re-stocking the food store, and maintaining the building and grounds.

Recently, a member of staff suggested that Matthew might like to try some courses that the university was running as part of an open week. Although he had some reservations as he is dyslexic and hated school, he completed the courses and enjoyed them, and now plans to complete a degree in teaching this year: "It was like, I'm too old, I can't afford to go, I won't be able to do it and all this, and by the time I left – I can get the funding, they'll help me with my dyslexia, and I'm not too old because I met a couple of guys there who were 77 [...] and anyway, I'm doing it for me, that's the key."

Everybody we spoke to at NWCC knew Matthew and his story, and some of the volunteers had started volunteering after being inspired by Matthew's story. One member of staff said "everything about him is different. Even his physical appearance – he looks so much more well now, you wouldn't recognize the man who first walked in here."

**Key finding:** Building Blocks provides effective low to medium level mental health support to those who may not engage or find success with statutory services, through:

- A non-clinical community setting
- Flexible, ongoing support that is not time-limited
- Peer-led setting, such as activity groups, where people feel less pressured to talk and can gradually build up confidence

# Wider findings: what works well

## The quality of provision

An overall theme from our findings was that the quality of support provided by New Wortley Community Centre through Building Blocks was of an excellent standard and very highly valued by the local community.

***“The number of parents that come back from the Christmas hampers and the Christmas offer that and thanked us to pass on to New Wortley was just unbelievable. We had one parent crying and she saw what (the hamper) was she was like, ‘I didn't imagine that this would be what I would get’.” (External Stakeholder)***

***“The funding that they receive, I feel is reflected in the service that they produce, we all want more funding in that way but I feel that whatever (New Wortley) get funding wise is really embedded in to providing something for this community.” (External Stakeholder)***

***“I don't know what would happen if that had to go. I really don't, if that service wasn't there. I don't. I don't know what we'd do.” (External Stakeholder)***

## The value of the team

Most people we spoke to told us that they felt the staff at New Wortley Community Centre were invaluable. Some members of the cultural café talked about how valuable it was to be seen as someone with important skills and knowledge to offer, through cooking and more widely.

One person explained that she had a degree in her country of origin and was highly skilled in her profession, and after moving to England had been applying for cleaning jobs. She said that one of the members of staff listened to her experience and encouraged her to apply for university and more skilled jobs rather than cleaning, which helped to build her self-esteem.

Other people told us how important it was to them that staff asked how they were every time they came in and actively listened – staff helped them to address any issues they could support with, remembered things people had told them in the past, and didn't push people to talk if they didn't feel ready.

***“She said they [the children] were safe going here [...] we started talking and it just clicked like that. I feel like something is out of me. Like I live outside. I think if I have a problem or if I need help, she'll be there for me [...] if she can take 50% or 70% of my problems! When I got home, I was like ‘ohhh!’ I had a drink! My husband said what happened? I said oh, I found this lady that I can go and see that I like.” (Focus group)***

Building Blocks is an asset-based community development project, and new groups and activities are constantly being added to the offer. Whilst not all of these activities continue, a key success factor in New Wortley Community Centre being able to respond to local need and people's interests is the skillset of the core team, and their flexibility. For example, one member of the team previously coordinated health and fitness activities, but when significant need increased around youth provision, was sufficiently skilled to adapt to meet this need.

A small number of community members talked about how changes in staffing often meant that their groups were run differently to before, which they found difficult to adjust to at first.

**Key finding:** Active listening and a supportive, motivational approach from staff is crucial in taking an asset-based approach, and effective in building people's trust, self-esteem and raising their aspirations. The teams skills and flexibility are essential in taking an asset-based approach

**Recommendation:** Explore ways to further embed this approach across the staff and volunteer team, particularly with those who are new to the team.

## Supporting culturally diverse communities

Although the population of New Wortley is largely White British, the area has grown more culturally diverse over time. NWCC identified that some people from culturally diverse communities in New Wortley experienced different barriers to statutory services, and sought to adapt their offer to meet different needs.

***“We were in some of the local primary schools and there were issues coming up time and time again about some children not accessing the schools properly [...] If there were any issues that came up with children, with mum there was a lack of communication because they couldn't understand each other, they kept missing each other. We thought [...] how can we as a community organisation help with that?” (Staff)***

To support this work, NWCC employed a Family Inclusion Worker through the Building Blocks project to support culturally diverse communities and shape the centre as a safe and inclusive environment.

***“Where there's somebody who's accessing centre, who's English isn't very good and the child who's got, I don't know, a learning need for example, but the school is failing to understand what parents mean, then Lornette is the person in the middle that can try and help with that” (Staff)***

Within the centre, a Cultural Café was established, providing a gateway for people from culturally diverse communities to volunteer, cook food from different cultures and share this with other people in the community centre. The Cultural Café has had a significant positive impact on both the volunteers and the wider community centre.

Many of the people we spoke to from culturally diverse communities told us that they had come into the centre and used the Building Blocks service to access support around completing application forms or gaining employment. Through Building Blocks, they had started volunteering at the Cultural Café and found this to be a safe, welcoming environment where they made friends and found a stronger sense of community.

***“I was blind, though I can see. The reason I say that is because I’m in this country, and I think I know everything I need to know, but I don’t. If you don’t know, you don’t ask, people won’t tell. And you’ll be in the dark. I live up there, I’ve been passing, but I didn’t know there was something special going on here.” (Focus group)***

***“I had exactly two Spanish friends, but I needed other people. I need to be confident in my language.” (Focus group)***

### **Case study: Rani’s story**

Rani was originally from India but moved to LS12 and has been coming to NWCC for 2 years. When she first came into the centre, she was looking for support around her Leave to Remain paperwork. Now she is a volunteer for the cultural café and comes in regularly.

Through Building Blocks, she has accessed support through the Healthy Holidays provision, and her children regularly eat at the Cultural Café and try new foods from different cultures, Rani and her children have gone on trips to the seaside arranged by NWCC, attend yoga classes and have been involved in putting on a pantomime at the centre.

Rani was supported to apply for college, and attends three days a week for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. Rani feels her English has improved significantly and loves coming into the centre.

Staff and people in focus groups felt that people from culturally diverse communities felt more comfortable coming into the community centre when they could see members of staff there who looked like them.

***“We’re the only two members of staff of an ethnic minority. So I think that’s helped because a lot of people, they automatically put a barrier up, and we always say you kind of sympathize and you recognize people who look like you.” (Staff member)***

The perception of New Wortley Community Centre from the external stakeholders we spoke to is that the service caters well for culturally diverse communities:

***“There's always people from completely different cultures that are there and it's got that educational side to it as well because you can learn about the food and the traditions” (External stakeholder)***

Supporting culturally diverse communities is a clear area of growth for New Wortley Community Centre, and therefore Building Blocks, and a local need that they have gone a significant way in meeting. To extend this support, we found two key areas for further growth:

### **Making information more accessible, e.g. in other languages**

Currently, the Cultural Café and some groups for children and young people are well-attended by culturally diverse communities. Although there is a wealth of information available in leaflets or flyers within the community centre, more information available in other languages could make the full variety of support, services and groups more accessible for people from diverse communities.

***“We're the only two members of staff of an ethnic minority. So I think that's helped because a lot of people, they automatically put a barrier up, and we always say you kind of sympathize and you recognize people who look like you.” (Staff member)***

### **Educating other members of the community centre on other cultures**

Many people we spoke to said they felt they had learned something new about different cultures through the Cultural Café. However, there was some misapprehension amongst volunteers at the Cultural Café to share things about themselves and their culture in case this was misunderstood or not welcome.

***“Some of us thought this is for whites, I mean pardon me that this is for not the people with colour because it's for whites. So you can't go there, even the shops in town I can't go there [...] because of this panic and fear, you feel like if you go there something will happen to you or someone will say ‘why are you here?’ so you just draw yourself back.” (Focus group)***



**Key finding:** Building Blocks is effective in supporting people who may not engage with statutory services, or who may need a different kind of support through:

- Maintaining a flexible, 'drop-in' service
- Building up trust and a reputation with communities as an organisation that was separate and independent from statutory services

**Recommendation:** There is a balance to be considered between maintaining a flexible drop-in service, with the clear benefits this brings to communities who may not engage with a statutory or "mainstream" services, and developing and strengthening systems for capturing, reviewing and sharing learning, which requires more data collection and therefore more structure.

## Addressing ongoing community issues

New Wortley Community Centre responds to changes in the needs of the local community rapidly, and many of the new activities that Building Blocks project introduced had been informed by changes or issues that were taking place in the local community.

As described, the community centre established new support mechanisms to address issues around poor mental health, high rates of suicide, and an increasingly culturally diverse population. In addition, antisocial behaviour and crime amongst young people is an ongoing issue that people told us the community centre was working to address.

***"Lots of kids I know my children's age, now I cry when I see them outside selling drugs [...] lots of children don't understand, don't finish school. [...] But this community has big powers, makes big change." (Focus group)***

***“It's been about trying to incorporate some of that, looking at what's going on around us and trying to incorporate that into what we're doing now” (Staff Member)***

***“I know my colleague will be speaking to Becky because he's doing a quite a big key piece on that at the moment because we've got quite a lot of gangs and antisocial behaviour at the moment and we've got other gangs that are coming into the area. I know Becky and Graham will have been communicating about that and I know my colleague's trying to pull together and meet in to sit down with other professionals to talk about that which is really good.”  
(External Stakeholder)***

## Creating an inclusive environment

Alongside support for culturally diverse communities, people told us they felt New Wortley Community Centre had recently become a more inclusive environment on a wider scale. This has been done through Building Blocks, by listening to people's strengths and aspirations and building new services into New Wortley Community Centre to support these.

***“They've opened up centre to a bigger, wider range of community and people...There was a history with the community centre that if you weren't part of the club you weren't allowed in, so you would be treated as isolated from the centre. So for many years...it was only a very small minority of the Community that were actually using the facilities.” (External Stakeholder)***

***“The things that they offer now, it's so broad. It's not just families, it's for the whole of the community” (External Stakeholder)***

NWCC focuses on services being inclusive rather than exclusive by “listening to the people that are accessing the service”, which was described by staff as “part of that concept that also feeds into building blocks”. This helps the service take a flexible approach to membership and reducing barriers to people participating in activities.

For example, a focus groups participant who identified as female told us they had previously been excluded from a walking group by a new staff member, as the group was at the time a 'men's walking group'. The rest of the group were happy for her to join and had not been positive about the decision to exclude her, as this had been an upsetting experience for the female participant. After a change in staffing, this decision was revised and the men's group made open to anyone.

***“When I first started working here and I was taken to come and have a look at New Wortley it just didn't have a nice feel to it. You walk in now, and you feel part of a family when you walk in, you're made to feel welcome, people know you by your name, you know you've just got that sense of feeling part of it when you go in... I just think it's amazing, you know, and there's a definite there's a definite change being made to how it's presented.” (External Stakeholder)***

## Wider findings: areas for growth

### Capacity and physical assets

The defining philosophy of NWCC is that if people are allowed to have the resources, they know how to solve their own problems. The community centre consistently works to pull in additional resources to meet new and changing needs within the local community. However, this can present challenges as staff capacity and the physical space of the community centre cannot always flex as quickly.

For example, New Wortley have responded to rising demand in their local area by expanding its volunteer counselling service. The service, which works with external student counsellors to provide a free service to community members, has increased the number of active counsellors.

Increasing the number of counsellors has allowed more people to access counselling in a community setting, and made this pathway 'smoother.' Setting up new services requires a significant amount of staff capacity, and whilst this service is successful and effective, student counsellors described 'teething problems' during the initial few months.

Responding to different needs and having a variety of services that are funded through different sources is a strength for NWCC, but can also present challenges. For example, on some occasions people who live outside of New Wortley and Armley may come into the centre for a new activity, and may enquire about the food store. Although the centre will primarily signpost people to their local emergency food provision, if this is not possible they will not leave people without food. Expanding services can therefore have an impact on resilience support such as the food store and hygiene bank.

Other external stakeholders also appreciated that staff involved with Building Blocks worked hard and were very busy, but suggested that more staff capacity might allow them to develop a more efficient mechanism for finding out what impact NWCC had had on the patients/clients they referred to the centre.

***“I refer people all the time, but it would be nice to hear more about how they get on, the impact [...] I know it’s capacity, but it would help me improve the way I signpost people.” (External stakeholder)***

## **Physical assets**

Physical assets were also identified as a limitation for the centre, for example having a more private, purpose-built space for one-to-one counselling within the building: *“if (New Wortley community centre) wanted to do more on counselling and make it more ideal then I think they could look to try and find a proper dedicated counselling space where you're not going to be disturbed”*.

Counsellors talked about some noise from the community café carrying through into the counselling room, which can be off-putting, and on occasions another member of staff entering the room during a counselling session.

Building developments in general were one of the most frequent suggestions included in survey responses, with ideas including:

- a mezzanine floor
- better heating/solar panels
- a porch in the main area
- moving panels to allow more flexible use and group isolation from interruptions.

It was felt that building developments may also help make the centre more visible to the community, with many people in focus groups stating that they didn't realise that the community centre was there for a long time, or they didn't think it was a space that was available to them – *"I thought it was maybe something for elderly people."* Some suggested more signage outside the building that included pictures of the diverse people that use the community centre to better show how welcoming it is.

Other physical assets people felt could improve the offer included gym equipment, and a minibus to allow the walking group to go on walks further afield.

## Encouraging people to try new things

Trying new things and coming away with a sense of achievement was something that people in focus groups told us they really valued.

However, staff identified a barrier to this being that some people feel very comfortable in a group that they attend, and then don't want to try anything else.

***"So having people who've been in groups for like 10 years but yet you're still doing the same thing and I'm thinking, this can't be productive" (Staff member)***

People in focus groups told us that going to a new group for the first time made them feel nervous or anxious, even though they knew that this would only be the case for the first session. Several people told us that anxiety or other mental health conditions could make this more difficult, as they often felt nervous in a group full of new people.

***"I would like to try. It's just the anxiety, you know, stop me going into the room." (Focus Group)***

Therefore, potential solutions to address this barrier could involve developing a buddying system for those who are keen to move to other groups but feel hindered by their anxiety or nerves.

Participants also felt that they were more likely to attend groups if they had a pre-planned activity organised for them in the group, claiming that *“It makes it easier to actually decide to get involved if you're looking forward to doing something. But there's nothing on, it's like there's no drive for you to actually leave the house and come here”*.

## More time made to celebrate success

While the services and collaborations taking place in Building Blocks were seen as hugely positive by service users, volunteers and external stakeholders, it was felt that more time could be spent acknowledging and celebrating the achievements that had been made possible through the programme.

One stakeholder felt that when working with the centre both parties *“always reflect on what we've not done but then we never look at what we have done and where we have moved forward,”* which if done would be *“good for morale”*.

A dedicated time and space for a celebration event to take place would provide a significant boost and a positive new aspect to an already thriving relationship between NWCC and organisations and services they work in partnership with.

***“I feel we've lost that sense of them face to face meetings a little bit because everybody's so busy...it would be nice to maybe once a quarter say right, let's have a celebration within New Wortley just come together and share where we're at. I think it's good for our morale because as much as it's lovely saying to you all these positive things that New Wortley are doing, it'd be nice for me to be saying it to them as well.” (External Stakeholder)***

# Recommendations

## Investing in strengthening targeted monitoring

One of the key strengths of Building Blocks is that people can access support without needing to disclose a lot of personal information, or commit to regular appointments. This opens up the support service to a broader group of people, who are less likely to engage with statutory services.

However, there is a tension between keeping services flexible and requiring little commitment from people who access them, and keeping enough structure to be able to capture learning, review and develop systems for targeting improvements. Enhanced monitoring systems would enable New Wortley Community Centre to direct their finite resources where they are most needed, and enable them to be even more responsive to communities. For example, implementing a system to record the following information would provide a strong data set to capture learning and inform decision making:

- Outcome stars when people initially access Building Blocks, then after 6 months
- Numbers attending group meetings
- Optional equality monitoring questionnaires to activity group members at regular intervals, with results centrally recorded and shared with staff
- Multiple accessible methods for people to submit feedback such as 'smiley face' tokens in reception, or optional feedback questionnaires to activity group members at regular intervals with results centrally recorded and shared with staff

## Encouraging members to try new groups

People that we spoke to strongly identified with other members of the activity groups they attended, felt a sense of ownership over their activities and enjoyed the sessions. However, there was some nervousness and occasionally resistance from people who have been attending groups for several years around trying new groups. Several people mentioned anxiety around trying new groups, although lots talked about how useful they had found it to bring along a friend or someone they knew.

This could be done through:

- More information about other activities and events happening at NWCC shared within groups
- Encouraging members to try attending new groups through a buddy system, or through joint group events
- Planned “taster” sessions at different activity groups, with details of activities shared in advance

## Continue investing in partnerships to:

### **a) Close the feedback loop**

The value of not being a statutory organisation is considerable, and a key strength for New Wortley Community Centre. External partners refer a wide range of people with different needs to the centre, which can sometimes result in challenging situations. Investing some time in feeding back to partners about the impact of their referral, and how NWCC has been able to support that person, could result in more appropriate referrals, and a deeper understanding of the impact of Building Blocks for both NWCC and wider partners.

### **b) Expand reach**

New Wortley Community Center has already expanded its reach considerably, targeting support to wrap around culturally diverse communities, addressing the root causes of poor mental health, and expanding geographically by beginning youth outreach activities.

In order to maintain the focus on local communities whilst remaining responsive to local need and the root causes of these, NWCC will need to work closely with partners to find joint solutions. This has already been achieved in work with Armley Helping Hands to support both older people and families effectively. It was also recommended in the New Wortley Health Needs Assessment that “a huge burden of this works sometimes falls on the community centre and it would be a positive move to increase funding and partnership work in these areas,” acknowledging that much of the community support in the area is provided solely by NWCC.