

# GREAT COMMUNITIES

People with learning disabilities and/or autistic people as community leaders and coproducers.



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University of Chester, December 2024.

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# A special thank you

Our sincere thanks go to the lived experience advisory board who expertly co-designed and reviewed this research: Jess, Lewis, Nicole, Sarah and Tyler, chaired by Ciaran and Peter (Great Communities) and Angela (Community Catalysts). Thanks also to Kathryn (MacIntyre) for leading this collaborative research.

Great Communities agreed to be named in this report, but we use different names [in square brackets] for the photographers who took part to protect their privacy.

# Introduction

This report outlines an approach to coproduction and community development, called Great Communities (GC for short), developed by the charity MacIntyre. It brings together a network of people who have a learning disability, physical disability and/or autism.

Co-production is about combining everyone's strengths so that we can work together to achieve positive change. Too often public services are designed by people who don't have direct experience of what it's like to need or use them. Ultimately, decisions are made for people, not with them. Using co-production, we can do things differently. This means communities truly playing a part in how decisions are made - where things happen with people, instead of to them (Scottish Co-production Network, 2024).

In Warrington, GC connects people over 16-years-old who are not eligible for social care services. GC encourages people to draw on their knowledge and abilities to enrich their own and others' lives and play a positive role in their local community. People lead or attend different groups or activities, including ***film club, gym, cycling, water-sports, walking activities, arts groups, social living rooms, gaming groups and special interest groups, such as animal care.***

The University of Chester explored people's experiences of playing a part in GC using 'Photovoice'. People used cameras to tell stories about the impact of GC on their lives and communities.

# Approach to the research

Photovoice provides a way for people to share expertise and knowledge. Our approach was inspired by Wendel and colleagues (2019):

1. Research team explained the research purpose, shared example images (see e.g., <https://photovoice.org/>) and discussed personal safety and privacy when taking photos.
2. People working with and for Great Communities (total n=20) took photographs inspired by the prompts: *What happens at Great Communities? What is good about Great Communities? Do you have any ideas to make it better?*
3. People each selected 4-5 of their favourite images.
4. In a focus group, each person explained their photos and discussed others' photos. Themes were identified as a group.
5. The researchers wrote this report and shared it with coresearchers and advisory board for comment and changes.



# Findings

The photographs and descriptions that follow show that coproduced projects can provide **friendships, connections to new communities and the natural world, opportunities to work together on new interests, improved mental health, journeys of personal development, creativity and positive impacts on local environments and communities.**



My film club: we've screened Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, Home Alone: that had the big attendance record of 56 people. Everyone loves attending my film club. I always pick good films for everyone to enjoy. I get good attendances to support my passion project. It's the best thing that I absolutely love doing... We had a bit of a think bubble, a spider diagram, coming up with ideas of projects. I thought, I want to do a film club for my friends in the local community, for people who can't afford getting two buses up to the cinema. It's still thriving five years later. I also bring Film Club to the cinema I work at. I introduced all my mates, they put the film on just for us... One idea to try to make it better is I might dress up as one of the film characters, like Batman or Darth Vader. [My friends] help out so much, they bring popcorn and always provide the best movie-going experience. They bring treats and they really enjoy attending film club. To do an autism friendly film club, go out there, find a venue and a good projector, a good screen and speakers. And promote it on social media. Pick a good film, introduce it.



A retro gaming evening I run once a month. Two of the lads there are playing a Star Wars game. It's just a place where people can meet and relax who haven't got a PlayStation, Xbox or PC at home. They can come down, play, chat. There are not just video games, there's chess, board games and I've been asked to bring models, just for something different. This is something I do outside of [care] work. That's how I relax. The benefits are escapism. For a couple of hours once a month, they can just sit down, switch off the real world and have a laugh... A couple more consoles would be great... we've had loads of screens donated. About 16 people attend. Some people need a bit of support playing on consoles. Sometimes they've never played before, so I just give them a little bit of direction and they all pick it up rather quickly... Me as a support worker, and the person I support, we love coming here. It's his favourite place to be... he'd go every single day for a brew and a smoke... I go on my days off... When I found out my brother [was unwell], I went there, sat in the corner and had a brew. Because that's the only place I wanted to be... I like the atmosphere, the environment. It's just soothing for me... the people... being part of something.





A sightseeing bus for London. I bought this... I love those things... to me it means something. I got into them when I was five or six years old. My mum used to take me on the bus into town.... I've been into them ever since... People take them for granted... They serve us every day without fail... Take you where you need to go... I used the shells because I thought it would give a good backdrop to the bus... Great Communities have helped me to come out of my shell... I wouldn't be involved in anything... I wasn't doing very much... I remember sitting in [a café] a bit glum and a bit miserable. I bumped into the GC coordinator, and he said, why don't we set up something? I remember going to the Art Centre ... when I first went, I felt a bit awkward because it was new and I'm not great with communicating when I'm nervous. So, I decided to try it... That's what the shells signifies. It signifies to me enjoying being open and being able to get to somewhere...



	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
AM	LUNCH CLUB 10-2pm	GREENS GRAND-SM 10am PS WORK 10-2pm	FRIENDSHIP GP 10-12pm NET CLUB 130pm 1st Mon of Month	M-POWER JJ + PS 9am-2pm	WHEELS FOR ALL 10-12pm RUBIK'S ENNIS ROOM 11-1pm	M-POWER JJ 10-2pm	M-POWER - JC 10-2pm CHURCH - SM 10.45 - 12pm
PM	AUTISM SPEERING GP 2-4pm		CHOIR - 3-4.30pm	FIT TO TACKLE 1pm DANCE + DRUM JC - 5.30-7pm WOLF CLUB 6-8pm JJ + PS		Rowing Club 3-5pm PS + JC	
EVE	GAME'S NIGHT! LAST MONDAY OF MONTH 6.30-8.30pm	HOODS + JABS PS - 6-8pm	MINICITYRC DISCO - 3RD WEEK OF MONTH 7pm	FILM CLUB 7pm (LAST TUES OF MONTH)	CREATING ADVENTURES MONTHLY SOCIAL (CLASS FREE) M-POWER 5-8pm JJ + PS	PS - PARTY 7.30pm + Sleepover @ Midvale	

Opportunities to try new things. Try things that I wouldn't normally have tried... On the back of [staff] connection with Warrington Rowing Club and some of the work that [another GC] group had done previously, there was this opportunity to do a learn to row course. So, it's providing opportunities for things that I wouldn't normally have done, regardless of ability, for everybody...

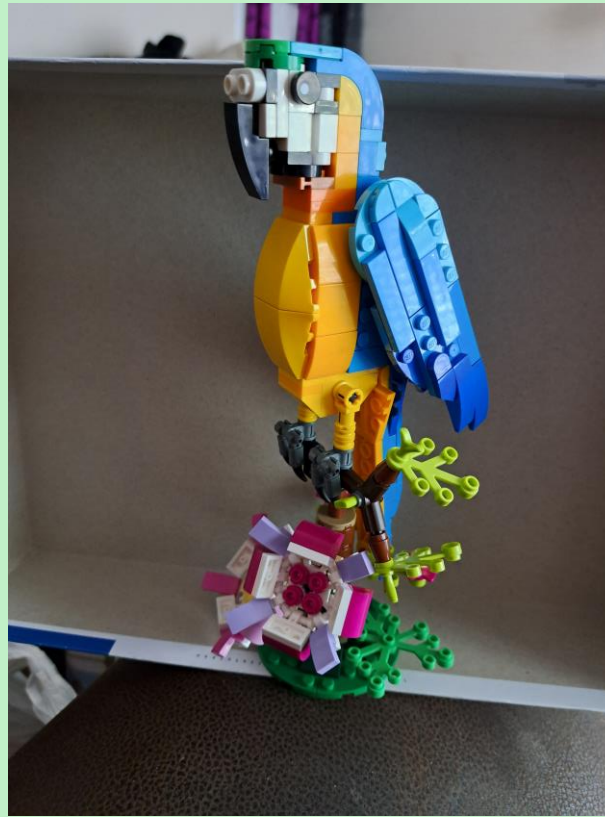
Fit to Tackle [a beginner's fitness programme at a local rugby club]... This collaboration meant that I took part with people that I support. That led to me then joining the Fit to Tackle full programme. And that's kick-started me getting back active again...

This demonstrates a full timetable for people that I support. It's through Great Communities that we've made the connections... It's the collaboration that has led to such a full timetable... It means the people that we support have a full and enriching life... Engagement has gone up... Professionals comment on the full timetable that they have and how enriching their lives are. And parents as well, families.



That's me... Paddleboarding... That's something I wasn't sure about... I was scared of getting on the thing. But next time we do it, I won't be so scared. ..

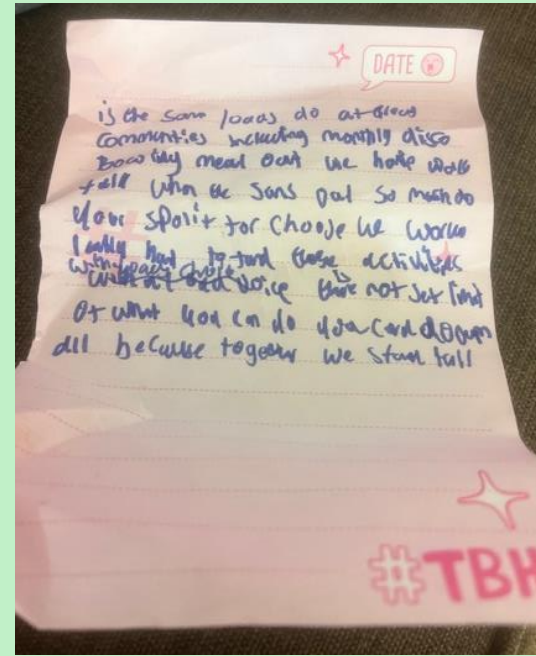
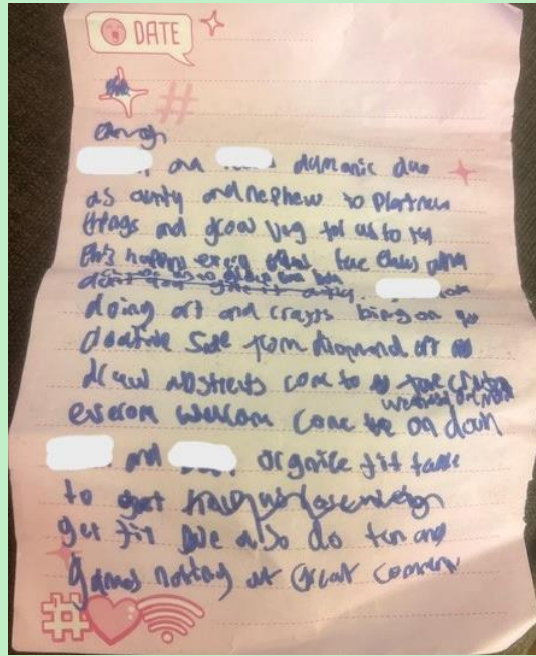
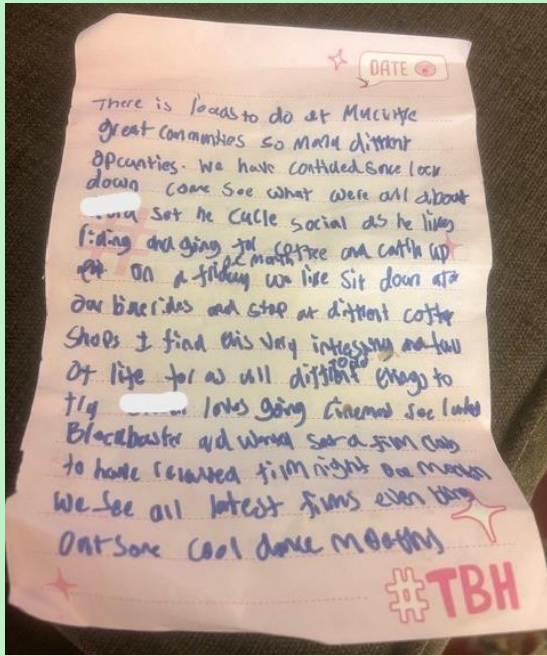
The stuff they use at Fit to Tackle [fitness training]. I exercise at Fit to Tackle... Burpees... I enjoy it... Because it gets me to do things and I'm losing weight... I went to the gym, and they had loads of machines. I went on the bike... the rowing machine... the ski machine, the paddle ropes... That's the steps at Warrington [Rugby Club] ... It's people. It's the heart and soul of Warrington... one of them has got my uncle's name on it.... he used to come on the pitch with the 'magic sponge'... I used to go [to games] when I were a kid... we used to sit and have a packet of crisps between us, one drink between us... I wouldn't have known that was there.



That's an art project that I did for the exhibition at a community venue I put that [flower] in to showcase what I can do. Great Communities means that I can share my art with people who have similar interests. I enjoy my hobby and I'm more than happy to show it to other people...

That's a Lego set. I have an idea of doing a Lego set for one of my art lessons. I've got plenty of Lego projects I've done in cabinets. Technically Lego is classed as art because you can make anything with them...

These gates are for an art exhibition that's being featured in a Town Centre exhibition. It's technically meant to be different seasons, but I have an old one there to showcase the history as well, not just the different seasons. I actually finished that off in my art group earlier this month. It's just about sinking in that it was in a huge public art exhibition.



There is loads to do at MacIntyre Great Communities, so many different opportunities. We have continued since lockdown, come and see what we're all about. [Rob] set up cycle social as he likes bike riding and going for coffee and catch up on a Friday. We like to sit down after our bike rides and stop at different coffee shops. I find this very interesting. Full of life for us to do different things, to try. [Bruce] loves going to the cinema, seeing the latest blockbusters. And setting up a film club to have film nights. To see all the latest films. Even showing our dance moves. [Sam] and [Lee], dynamic duo... plant things and grow veg for us all to try. This happens every Tuesday and Thursday. [Jane] loves doing art and crafts, bringing out your creative side. From diamond art to drawing. Everyone loves it. [Wes] and [Bec] do Fit to Tackle, to keep fit. Fun and games at Great Communities. There's loads to do at Great Communities, from monthly discos, bowling, meals out. We have walk and talk when the sun's out. So much to do. You're spoilt for choice. We've worked really hard to find all these activities. There's not a set limit of what you can do. You can do all of them. Because together we stand tall.



This signifies Great Communities: the Friendship Group just after the second lockdown where the world started to open up again. 95% of the time when we meet somebody, they are socially isolated, they're not accessing what's going on locally, they might have left school or college, and friendships and connections have dwindled.

Now if you come to a Friendship Group, it is probably double that number. This was a time where people weren't that confident about going out and getting together... the following session we met with the learning disability leader from the NHS, and she was talking about Covid and what the hospital were doing and that was an extremely powerful couple of weeks for the group because people started to just develop confidence to get together outside again...

This shows togetherness, people are living their lives again... it really does show what friendship and togetherness is all about in Warrington.



Our garden foreman, often found in the corner with a cup of coffee and a cigarette. He's been here from the start. Rain, sun, shine, snow. It was -4 one day and he's still there. Commitment, dedication to the garden. The friendships, he knows them all. [Lee] does not talk but the bond between these two is enormous. The gloves signify liking to take other people's gloves home! Finding random pair of gloves everywhere...

When a new volunteer came along, he was very withdrawn from the group, he was at the start of his journey and [Ray] followed him and smoked with him. It really opened up that social boundary and that confidence... The guy has been with us for a couple of years now, [Ray] was his first step into developing those social skills. And those relationships with the rest of the group. It was a very subtle thing... He's probably one of the most recognisable faces... Everybody knows him.



This is about the start and what can be achieved with everyone working together, we're actually planting runner beans here. It represents friendship. Without this project, [Lee] would be isolated. There's nothing else for him anywhere. He doesn't tick boxes. Everyone says he incapable of doing things and I keep saying, "he's not incapable. He's more than capable", you just have to find a way...

This is his happy place... a side garden where the guys have worked. From planting those seeds, they've transformed an unloved, unwanted piece of land into a garden that's now award winning. It's took the Garden Gang, everyone coming together to transform that into what it is now. It's just amazing... This says, 'make a difference'. And it also says, 'together we grow'. I'm getting emotional... they have made a difference to me. Thank-you guys...

Again, in the garden which has come from a wasted piece of land and its now attracted in and is thriving with wildlife. A moth. It started as a little caterpillar, and it's developed and grown into a beautiful butterfly.





The snacks represent Friendship Group. [Sam] loves food and snacks, anything that's bad for him! He loves coming to Friendship Group, getting together with everybody, having a brew and a biscuit. His friends know that he's not allowed too many because of his health so they'll say, "no more" and he accepts that, even though he loves his food. He understands that they're doing it for his own good. Taking care...

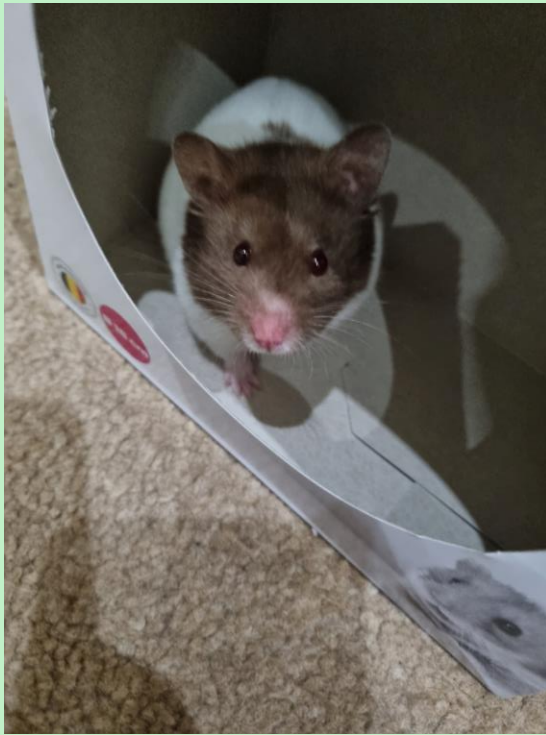
This is a choir that [Sam] is in. This is not a Great Communities choir, but he's a member of this choir because of [Great Communities'] Friendship Group. They were all mentioning that they were going to this choir and on the back of that, it's a connection that's been made. [Sam doesn't talk much], but he loves to go to the choir. It's more the social aspect of it. Again, it's just making connections for him...

[Sam] loves a disco! It's just something that he enjoys to do. He loves getting together with people.



[Sam] doesn't really show much enthusiasm, but he laughs and smiles the whole way around Fit to Tackle [Fitness training]. He makes up the moves himself sometimes... when he doesn't want to do something, [he says]: “I'm not doing it”, whereas he loves to go to Fit to Tackle... He managed the 3000-step challenge... His sister's always commenting on how trim he's looking these days...

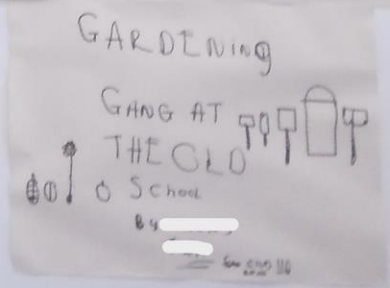
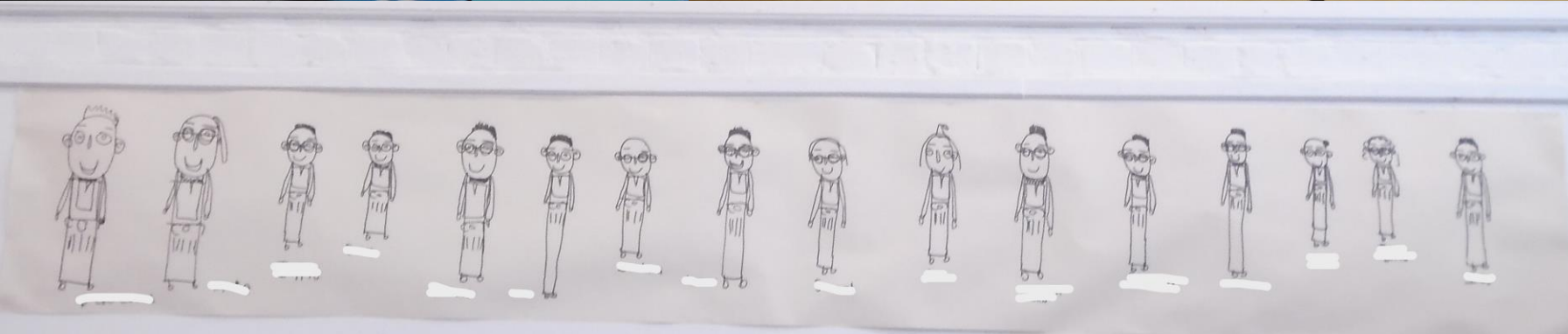
[Sam doesn't talk much]... all he would do when he first [moved in] is sit and watch videos of football... Now three times a week he'll get up, come downstairs, walk into the kitchen and he's like, “Garden Gang, Garden Gang”. So, he actively wants to go all the time... he's quite happy to dig weeds and do all the shovelling... He's always asking to go. Again, it's the friendships that he's built with people. He speaks a lot more... his engagement not just the gardening, but other activities...with staff, everything has improved since these activities that he does with Great Communities.



I love animals... I'm going to be bringing some animals in and teach everyone about my animals... That's my little baby boy, Milky Way. He's a Syrian hamster. He's about one and a half years old. He can live up to three...

That's Cecilia. She's a snake. She eats mice and a lot of cheese. She's a really good girl. She's the one I'm bringing to the [centre]...

Vivian is a guinea pig. She's about four and a half years old. She's from Peru... Yes, from all over the world my animals are. Great Communities means I can teach people about animals. I think they help me get me into daily routine. I can share my animal ideas and show people how to look after them.



This is our magazine. I'm a MacIntyre reporter... [The GC coordinator] asked me to write an article in the magazine and draw some pictures of the Garden Gang... I didn't miss anyone out. I did that and I designed t-shirts that were printed. There's a new edition coming out soon...

This is my design [and] my characters. I like to draw. Instead of sitting in my room, do something. And this is what I created when we did the art display at the [community venue]... I love designing trainers... it's my passion. And it wasn't easy. That took me a long time... I'm hoping to create some designs for trainers. Great Communities lets me share my skills with my friends...



This is what I do. Fit to Tackle [Fitness training]. Me and [Wes] are ambassadors. I enjoy keeping fit and I've done the artwork for that as well. To be an ambassador means you're wearing the T-shirt, getting everybody involved, bring new people along to do it. Spread the word. We did an interview to talk about it on film.



We have a routine when we're going to the garden. [Lee] has to go and get his shoes and his gardening coat. It's bright and colourful and that's when he... knows he's going to be doing something he enjoys... So, we get in the car and the radio goes off, he directs me from home to here, pointing which way we're going. He shouts when the traffic lights are on, we're not getting there quick enough. So that's his morning routine getting organised for the Garden Gang... His favourite thing to do when we're out anywhere pick up leaves. He's done artwork with leaves that's been displayed at the [community centre]. The side garden in particular is purely his work. All the leaves he's picked up are now best compost. And it's been spread all over the garden for the next season. So that's a year's worth that's going to keep developing and developing year on year...

These are two awards he has achieved. He is actually now a learning disability and autism leader, and he's got them in his bedroom.



This is a public living room... it's had a massive impact on my mental health. It's helped me take myself out of isolation and provide a safe space to allow others to get out of isolation too. Running a public living room has enabled me to make new friends and connections. This has also given me the confidence to provide a service to my community... During lockdown, I was isolated at home... With support I had an interview with *Camerados*. It was basically just to stop isolation and pick up my mental health. Just to be around other people and give other people the chance to not be isolated. Get out and make friends... It's every two weeks. I'm desperate to open more than just once a fortnight... There's a quote on the mug there: The answer to your problems is each other. That relates to Great Communities... Being around people is the answer... *Camerados* are actually global, they're the ambassadors of the public living room... They go as far as New Zealand. We're literally world-wide... It was just a connection that we made. I really love the idea that it is a movement to bring people together... I'm really grateful and honoured that we've been able to have a public living room with a bit of support from Great Communities.



I've been inspired by [Jane in the group] to start making diamond art... It just gives me that comfort to do it while I'm watching different programmes... and I love Disney, so that's why I picked Mickey Mouse... I also do Friendship Group... I was working five days a week, and really struggling. So, thank you [staff member] because you helped me find other things to do... He helped me with the book club that I used to run... He helped me get involved with a charity that I'm part of... where we provide training for health professionals to have an understanding of learning disability and autism...





These are the pictures of my attic that has been done up during COVID lockdown for my train sets. It's still a work in progress... I was thinking, for people who are interested in model trains, we could open up a small model railway club, so people can build their dream layouts... Also, we could organise trips to heritage railways around the country or visit the National Railway Museum in York... I share my passion for trains at Friendship Group...

For film club, I bake treats for people to have during the film... film club is free entry, and my snacks are free as well... I made beignets: they're from New Orleans: little pastries with brown sugar on top... you could say for film club, I'm the chief caterer.



A bridge: I just love the difference that Great Communities makes... people make those connections... friends, relationships, families, neighbourhoods... And it's about giving back as well... [people are] skilled and talented, teaching people [their] skills... making friends and connections... I think sometimes we could bridge that gap a little bit more to communicate what's happening a little bit further... People need a little bit of additional help to look at venues like this, get that word out, but once that's done it naturally grows... it's about tapping into people's gifts and skills then people running with that themselves without needing the support... We're quite good at having a local Facebook page that's been really beneficial... I always I explain about what's going on in here [to the local authority] because... we support somebody on outreach... with shopping and social life and we realised he was actually struggling to maintain his home and his tenancy... That person has been linked into Great Communities and that's just completely changed everything because he's got this bigger support network.



This photo was taken by one of the garden gang and I love it because a way of thinking about Great Communities is that the coordinator is like a bee... And the people and organisations Great Communities connects with as flowers. I was thinking about how Great Communities goes and visits each flower and shares some of the pollen and pollinates and makes things happen, or spreads the ability for the flowers to make things happen for themselves... In the early days I was a little bit unsure about Great Communities having its own strong identity as I wanted it to be in the background making the wider community more inclusive. It has done that. But what this process has taught me is that it's really important to people to feel part of the making that happen. It's not just about the coordinator running groups, it's about everyone using their skills to make things happen in our town. And I feel really proud about that.

# Conclusion – *Greater Communities*

Everyone, including disabled and autistic people, can too often experience exclusion, loneliness and poor mental health. Coproduction is one way for people to be included and connected. Approaches like GC use coproduction to harness the strengths and skills of people. Done well this can have life and place changing benefits.

The photographs from the people of Great Communities are each unique and beautiful, but we identified some shared themes across the photographs including ***friendships, connections, teamwork, wildlife, shared interests, less formal-more personal, journeys of personal development, creativity and positive impacts on local environments and communities.***

The researchers plan to share these findings in an academic journal to highlight to others across the country that coproduced initiatives can connect people, communities and environments. These connections can benefit the individuals involved who often find new friendships, interests and aspirations, but also their broader communities which can benefit from happier, healthier citizens, and improved, more inclusive, community spaces and fit for purpose approaches.

For more information about this research, contact [g.buck@chester.ac.uk](mailto:g.buck@chester.ac.uk)