

To: Fairer Renfrewshire Sub-Committee

On: 5<sup>th</sup> June 2024

---

Report by: Chief Executive

---

Heading: Winter Connections Evaluation

---

## 1. Summary

- 1.1. At Leadership Board on 14 September 2022, elected members agreed that officers should develop a Winter Connections Programme which would provide a network of local places and spaces where people can connect to others in their community throughout winter.
- 1.2. In some local authority areas, plans were developed to open ‘warm banks’ – places where people can come to sit and keep warm during the winter period if they are having difficulty heating their homes. In Renfrewshire, the approach was focussed more on working alongside the local third sector to create opportunities for people to connect to each other and their communities over a range of activities. Winter Connections activities were designed to be always free, open to all, in every neighbourhood and guarantee a warm welcome.
- 1.3. Following a successful first year and a positive evaluation of the Winter Connections Programme in 2022/23, £75,000 of funding was allocated from the Fairer Renfrewshire programme to support the delivery of a second year of Winter Connections in 23/24. An additional £10,000 was allocated from the Recovery Change Fund.
- 1.4. An evaluation has now been carried out on the 23/24 programme, and the key messages of the evaluation include:
  - Once again, providing a specific activity at no cost and alongside provision of hot drinks or food has been key to the success of the Winter Connections programme.
  - The social aspect of bringing people together created a sense of belonging and provided a supportive environment and peer support, which was especially important for people who were feeling isolated.
  - Activities provided opportunities to reduce stress, learn new skills, increase confidence and be creative.

- Over twice as many people as last year benefited from the programme, demonstrating a continued need for access to free activities and food for individuals and families who are continuing to experience financial hardship.
- Providing free food alongside activities ensured that the programme contributed to tackling food poverty in a discreet and dignified manner.
- Benefits of the programme included connecting people with each other, reducing social isolation, providing fun activities, and encouraging new people to engage with services. It also helped to create a sense of belonging to the local community, provide the opportunity to learn something new, reduce financial costs and help people to learn about a new service in their local area.
- The programme enabled organisations to enhance their services and engage with new people, thereby raising awareness of their venues and services.
- Providing hot drinks in libraries enabled visitors to stay for longer, encouraged connections with others and provided a community asset where people felt comfortable, regardless of the purpose of their visit.

1.5. In addition to the key messages, the evaluation report also provides a series of recommendations to be considered as part of any future programme. A copy of the full evaluation is attached at Appendix 1.

1.6. At Leadership Board in April 2024, £75,000 funding was agreed to run a Winter Connections programme in 2024/25.

## **2. Recommendations**

2.1 It is recommended that members of the Fairer Renfrewshire Sub-Committee:

- Note the content of the report

## **3. Background**

2.1. The development of the Winter Connections Programme has been a key focus for officers. £75,000 of funding was allocated from the Fairer Renfrewshire programme to support the delivery of a second year of Winter Connections in 23/24. An additional £10,000 was allocated from the Recovery Change Fund.

2.2. The programme offers an extensive and varied programme of activities across Renfrewshire, hosted by community groups, typically between the months of November – March. Hosts are asked to sign up to Winter Connections principles, and support is provided to all host organisations including a Winter Connections toolkit, printed materials, information sharing, access to other services such as advice and provision of free period products.

2.3. Promotion of the programme and all linked activities is a key focus, with a partnership Winter Connections identity developed. Information on Winter Connections is available on the Council website, which includes a searchable map function. Activities are widely promoted through

social media, and printed materials have been widely distributed across all towns and villages across Renfrewshire.

2.4. The funding is now fully utilised for 23/4, and the programme has drawn to a close. A number of projects have secured alternative funding to continue their projects moving forward.

---

## Implications of the Report

1. **Financial** – There are no financial implications associated with this report, which provides an overview of the position and is for noting.
2. **HR & Organisational Development** – none
3. **Community/Council Planning** – This report provides an evaluation of the Winter Connections programme. This is a key contributor to the Fair priority of the Council Plan, as well as being well aligned to the priority areas of the Community Plan relating to supporting low income families with children and reducing health inequalities.
4. **Legal** - none
5. **Property/Assets** - none
6. **Information Technology** - none
7. **Equality and Human Rights** – The report provides an evaluation of the Winter Connections programme, which is considered to have a positive equalities impact in advancing equality of opportunity. Projects are monitored closely to understand the reach of a number of equality groups identified as priority groups, and an analysis of this reach is included within the evaluation document as well as reflections on how some groups may be better reached in further iterations of the programme.
8. **Health and Safety** - none
9. **Procurement** – none
10. **Risk** – none
11. **Privacy Impact** – none
12. **COSLA Policy Position** – none
13. **Climate Risk** – none

**Author:** Annabelle Armstrong-Walter, Strategic Partnerships and Inequalities Manager



Nature craft activity, Inchinnan

## An evaluation of the Winter Connections Programme 2023/24

*Through Winter Connections, we have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of community-driven initiatives. From fostering social connections to addressing food insecurity and providing opportunities for creative exploration, the programme has enriched the lives of local individuals and families.*

RIG Arts

[www.renfrewshire.gov.uk](http://www.renfrewshire.gov.uk)



# Contents

1.	Executive Summary .....	3
2.	About Winter Connections.....	4
3.	Programme Delivery .....	7
4.	Impact of the Programme.....	17
5.	What did we learn?.....	28
6.	Conclusions and recommendations .....	31
7.	Appendix 1 .....	32

# 1. Executive Summary

The Winter Connections programme was delivered for the first time between November 2022 and March 2023. The programme was delivered in partnership with local organisations and aimed to encourage people to connect and participate in activities in warm and welcoming spaces across communities in Renfrewshire.

Local community and voluntary organisations could apply for small grants of up to £2,000 to support with the additional costs of making venues, activities and sessions open as part of the programme. Items eligible for funding included equipment, food, energy costs, and rent.

The programme was very successful and as part of Renfrewshire Council's continued wider response to the cost-of-living crisis, between October 2023 and March 2024, £75,000 of funding was allocated from the Fairer Renfrewshire programme to support the delivery of a second year of Winter Connections. An additional £10,000 was allocated from the Recovery Change Fund.

## Key findings:

- Once again, providing a specific activity at no cost and alongside provision of hot drinks or food has been key to the success of the Winter Connections programme.
- The social aspect of bringing people together created a sense of belonging and provided a supportive environment and peer support, which was especially important for people who were feeling isolated.
- Activities provided opportunities to reduce stress, learn new skills, increase confidence and be creative.
- Over twice as many people as last year benefited from the programme, demonstrating a continued need for access to free activities and food for individuals and families who are continuing to experience financial hardship.
- Providing free food alongside activities ensured that the programme contributed to tackling food poverty in a discreet and dignified manner.
- Benefits of the programme included connecting people with each other, reducing social isolation, providing fun activities, and encouraging new people to engage with services. It also helped to create a sense of belonging to the local community, provide the opportunity to learn something new, reduce financial costs and help people to learn about a new service in their local area.
- The programme enabled organisations to enhance their services and engage with new people, thereby raising awareness of their venues and services.

- Providing hot drinks in libraries enabled visitors to stay for longer, encouraged connections with others and provided a community asset where people felt comfortable, regardless of the purpose of their visit.

## **2. About Winter Connections**

### **2.1. Background**

Following a successful Winter Connections programme over the winter of 2022/23, Renfrewshire Council's Leadership Board allocated £75,000 of funding in June 2023 from the Fairer Renfrewshire programme to run the programme again during 2023/24.

Once again, the funding provided small grants to local organisations to support delivery of a programme that would encourage people to connect and participate in activities in warm and welcoming spaces across communities in Renfrewshire.

The programme this year also benefited from an additional £10,000 from the Recovery Change Fund to ensure that Winter Connections activities were open to people affected by drugs and alcohol and people living with mental illness.

Local community and voluntary organisations could apply for small grants of up to £2,000 to support with the additional costs of making venues, activities and sessions open as part of the programme. Items eligible for funding included equipment, food, energy costs, and rent.

Funded activities needed to fit the criteria of Winter Connections and be:

- open, free and easy to access
- inclusive, welcoming, respectful, and safe
- able or willing to provide connections to other services and supports
- able to offer warm drinks/snacks/food along with activities, where possible

There were 58 applications to the programme which were assessed by officers from Renfrewshire Council, Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership and Engage Renfrewshire.

Of the 58 applications, 46 were successful, 11 were unsuccessful and one application was withdrawn. Unsuccessful applications were signposted to alternative sources of funding where appropriate.

A further £6,000 was allocated to One Ren to support the programme and to provide hot drinks, soup, and snacks in all Renfrewshire libraries. This included drinks and snacks for the twice weekly film club at Ferguslie Park which was set up as part of Winter Connections last year and has continued to run. It also provided free drinks and snacks for families using the SkoobMobile service at their community stops.

Winter Connections branded materials, including posters and stickers as well as leaflets with advice on where to find support with financial worries were also distributed to organisations participating in the programme along with free period products.

A dedicated Winter Connections webpage was set up on the Council's website with an interactive map displaying all venues, activities, and facilities.

Renfrewshire Council worked with Engage and Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership to assess applications to the programme, ensuring a transparent cross-sector approach that enabled partners to evaluate Winter Connections applications based on knowledge of other available support across Renfrewshire.

To understand the impact of the Winter Connections programme, a feedback form was sent to organisations and project visits were made to some projects to assess the difference that the programme had made. 36 organisations returned feedback which has been analysed in the sections below.

## **2.2. The Winter Connections Programme**

This year's programme benefited from a wide range of activities, including scuba diving, Nordic walking, and circus skills. Some activities were open to everyone and aimed to attract families and multiple generations, however some organisations focussed specifically on delivering sessions for children and younger people, for example, youth clubs, while others focussed on activities for older people or people from ethnically diverse communities.

Activities delivered as part of Winter Connections				
Creative activities	Health and Wellbeing	Children and Young People	Social activities	Practical support
Arts & Crafts	Carpet bowling	Youth club	Cinema trips and movie	Signposting to sources of advice
Shrubs to Suds	Fitness classes	Basic cooking class	Coffee mornings	Food provision
Nature crafting sessions (wildflower seed bombs, candle making, natural hand cream making)	Nordic walking	Lego stem club	Quizzes	Access to charge devices
Jewellery making	Scuba diving	Arts & crafts	Bingo	Language café
Painting, drawing and sculpture	Circus skills	Homework/after school club	Lunch Club	Distribution of clothing, period products and data sims
Sewing	Mindfulness, meditation, and stress management	Get Active at the MUGA	Board games	Scottish Refugee Council session for refugees and asylum seekers
	Choir singing		Music	

Activities for young people were often educational as well as fun, such as Lego Stem Club and basic cooking classes.

One project brought ethnically diverse communities together to build and strengthen social connections and to reduce social isolation by organising weekly Community Café Sessions and workshops bringing people from different generations, backgrounds, and experiences together in the local community.

Projects also offered practical support in the form of advice and signposting, distribution of clothing and food and, in the case of Sewing2gether All Nations, a language café for refugee and asylum seekers.

A list of the funded host organisations delivering Winter Connections activities can be found in Appendix 1.

### 3. Programme Delivery

#### 3.1. Promoting Activities

Renfrewshire Council’s Communications and Marketing team promoted the Winter Connections programme through media and social media. Statistics show that the content was seen on social media, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter by 74,614 times. The posts were engaged with on social media, where people liked, shared, retweeted, etc., a total of 34,356 times. Renfrewshire Council issued 4 media releases, included articles in 7 newsletters and published 4 Facebook posts, 3 tweets and 3 Facebook and Instagram Stories between November 2023 and March 2024. Case studies of 3 organisations were used as part of the promotion. Total web views for the dedicated website were 3,602.

Funded organisations used many different channels to promote their Winter Connections activities. Like last year, the most common way for residents to find out about activities was through social media and word of mouth. In addition to using the Winter Connections branded posters, many organisations created their own posters and distributed these throughout their local communities to promote their activities.

How did people find out about your Winter Connections project?	
Method of information	%
Social media	74
Word of mouth	66
Posters / flyers	43
Contact database/people attending other activities/Whatsapp groups	37
Other organisations e.g. church/sheltered housing/school	29
Referral from another organisation	20
Village or park notice boards	9

Note: All respondents provided more than one answer to this question

Inchinnan Development Trust hand delivered leaflets to the 760 houses in Inchinnan while RIG Arts placed posters and flyers around Seedhill to attract the attention of residents and passersby. They also promoted the project within their own network.



Over a quarter of organisations (29%) that responded had worked with other organisations to promote their activities, for example, sheltered housing complexes, housing associations, local schools and churches. Paisley Methodist Central Hall commented that they had a whole table of people who had been referred to the project by other organisations. CREATE Paisley found that young people encouraged their peers to attend sessions but working with local schools and the local housing association also helped to raise awareness of the project.

*Our Winter Connections project was primarily promoted through various channels, including collaboration with Linstone Housing Association and Linwood and Johnstone schools. These organisations played a crucial role in signposting and referring young people to our drop-ins. Additionally, word of mouth among young people was a significant factor in encouraging their peers to attend the sessions.*

CREATE Paisley

### 3.2. What worked well?

The opportunity to bring people together to socialise, meet new people and develop friendships was highlighted as a key factor that contributed to the success of the programme. Access to free and meaningful activities encouraged people to get out and about during the winter months and acted as a lifeline for some, especially those at risk of social isolation. People were able to connect in a way that they may not otherwise have had the chance to and build those connections in an inclusive and welcoming environment.

*The activities helped bring people together in a safe space, leading to interesting conversations and plenty of laughter.*

St Vincent's Hospice

*The programme's emphasis on fostering social connections and community cohesion was another key strength. Through creative workshops, collaborative projects, and shared meals, participants had ample opportunities to build relationships and support networks, combating social isolation and promoting a sense of camaraderie.*

RIG Arts

Access to hot drinks, snacks or meals at no cost was another important factor in attracting participants. The Thursday Club was able to provide a warm lunch to almost 100 older people every week and believe that this resulted in attendance at the club remaining high over the winter months. Food provision was particularly helpful for some participants who might not otherwise have had lunch or for those who relied on carers to give them lunch which could often be later in the afternoon. There were often leftovers which members could take home so that they had something to eat in the evening.

*Numbers tend to dwindle over winter as people are reluctant to leave their homes, but the combination of a heated hall and hot food and drinks has meant that people have continued to attend over winter. It enables people to turn their heating off for a few hours.*

The Thursday Club

Food was also important in encouraging participants at Home Start Renfrewshire and Inverclyde groups to continue to attend throughout the winter.

*Our groups are run in the morning and many of our families won't have eaten breakfast before attending. Winter attendance can often be interrupted by winter bugs or weather and*

*the addition of hot food encouraged some of the families to come along at times when they might otherwise have not ventured out.*

Home Start Renfrewshire and Inverclyde



Hot lunch, Sewing2gether All Nations

Active Communities found that giving children some input into what food they would like to eat whilst guiding them towards healthier choices resulted in a change in attitude towards healthy food.

*Some from the group have taken recipes home to cook with their families. It also ensured that the children were given a hot dinner and a warm place after school.*

Active Communities

Winter Connections also provided opportunities to enjoy fun activities at no cost. There was a wide variety of activities available that were well spread out across the Renfrewshire area, offering a chance to visit new venues and try something new. All projects were linked through the Winter Connections branding and logo and participants were able to take advantage of the opportunity to attend different activities on different days of the week, giving them something to look forward to every day.

Participants were able to learn new skills and build confidence and the diverse range of activities on offer catered to different ages and interests, ensuring that there was something for everyone.



*Offering a diverse range of artistic mediums allowed participants to explore different forms of creative expression, catering to varying interests and skill levels. This diversity ensured that each participant could find something that resonated with them, and we've found this approach incredibly positive for adults that want artistic engagement to help manage ill mental health symptoms.*

RIG Arts

Foot painting at Home Start Renfrewshire & Inverclyde

The additional funding contributed by the programme meant that many organisations were able to enhance their existing offer, providing new activities for people and, in the case of St Vincent's Hospice, engaging with members of the public that would not ordinarily engage with their services, raising awareness of their work. For Renfrewshire Effort to Empower Minorities (REEM) the programme offered a platform to widen connections and address social needs that were affecting the community, especially those at risk of isolation.

*The additional financial support greatly enhanced our Winter Connections programme, enabling us to make a positive impact by providing warm food, snacks, and high-quality arts and crafts materials. This support was particularly crucial given the rising costs of food and materials.*

CREATE Paisley

Another important element of the programme that worked well was the partnership working between projects and other partners. CREATE Paisley believe that the programme created more access points for vulnerable individuals in Renfrewshire. Organisations were able to signpost to services that people may not already have been aware of, and this was the experience at STAR Project, where strong links with the statutory and voluntary sectors were used to support vulnerable individuals.

*When individuals accessed our service that we were unable to support (i.e., mental health crisis, health concerns regarding substance use) ... we were subsequently able to refer individuals to their services quickly and effectively, with minimal disruption to the individuals.*

#### STAR Project

Howwood Community Council found that the informal atmosphere at their Winter Connections events encouraged villagers to highlight any concerns that they had, and these could then be raised with the Community Council.

When asked if there was anything that they would change about the programme, nine of the 34 organisations that responded stated that they would not change anything. Suggestions made by the remaining organisations are discussed below.

A few organisations would like to include additional activities or slightly change their service offer, for example having more games or creative activities or expanding the service to send participants home with meal packs. Kilbarchan Improvement Projects, which provided a six-week programme of films and musical entertainment, would like to try a different approach in future.

*Having attended the Renfrewshire HSCP and Luminare programme of singing and dementia training recently at Johnstone town hall, we realised that such a programme would be much more beneficial to our guests.*

#### Kilbarchan Improvement Projects

Some organisations worked closely with other partners, for example, Lochwinnoch Community Development Trust engaged with the local Community Link Worker at the GP surgery and arranged for a mental health group to attend their activities. Other organisations would like to improve their links to other services, for example, the STAR Project would invite partners from an advice agency to provide information and support to individuals who attend their activities who are experiencing financial insecurity.



Circus skills, Ferguslie Park

For some projects, a more targeted approach is needed to engage with participants. Community Circus Paisley were hoping to attract older people and anyone at risk of isolation, however most of the participants were home-schooled children.

*And whilst it was great to be able to provide activities for so many children and their parents, it wasn't the target audience we envisaged. Since we had to advertise it as open to all there isn't anything we could do to change that. If we ran it again, I'd probably like to work closer with other organisations to reach out to a wider/different audience.*

Community Circus Paisley

Another suggestion was to reduce or increase the length of activity sessions or change the starting time to later to support parents who are doing the school run in the morning. Howwood Community Council found that many of their attendees were reluctant to leave and would extend the session for an extra half an hour in future, whereas Ralston Out of School Care would reduce the length of their sessions.

*The club might have been a little long for some of the children to focus on the activities. Next time we would run it for about an hour. We did have younger children who wanted to come so we may run the club for younger children.*

Ralston Out of School Care

The additional funding contributed by the programme was helpful in providing activities and food however organisations would like to be able to offer activities all year round and many have been asked by participants if they will be delivering more sessions throughout the year.

Other suggestions were to start promoting the activity earlier, move to a larger capacity venue to accommodate increasing numbers of participants and improve accessibility.

*In terms of inclusivity, we are exploring funding options to make our Community Art Space 100% wheelchair accessible. This will involve widening the front and office doors, investing in ramps for all doorways and widening access to the Art Space toilet.*

RIG Arts

### **3.3. How many people attended?**

Organisations were asked about the number of people who attended their activities. We did not ask organisations to keep track of numbers while delivering activities, but some did, and others provided an estimate.

The average number of people attending each individual session was 25. Activities for younger people and older people were especially popular, for example bingo or coffee mornings and youth clubs. Friends of Howwood Park coffee mornings hosted 50 people at a time while Johnstone Castle Learning Centre's youth sessions provided for around 50 young people aged between 8 and 16 years old. Numbers fluctuated based on weather and holidays from 4 to 40 attendees. A Sewing2gether All Nations workshop attracted 38 participants while Erskine Arts and Rays of Hope averaged around 45 and 30 people respectively each week.



*Children enjoying hot chocolate after a MUGA session*

*The weekly MUGA sessions have been attended by 20 children on average, with 30 one week. This equates to nearly 50% of the primary school role.*

Langbank Swingpark Regeneration

The coffee mornings are generally repeat attendees each month, with a few new faces. Same with the fitness classes, bingo and cinema trips. The mindfulness class was attended by 70 different people.

### Friends of Howwood Park

From the 35 responses received, it is estimated that 3,900 different people benefited from the Winter Connections programme. Given that there were 45 projects participating in the programme this year, this number will be considerably higher and is already more than twice the number of people who benefited from the programme last year.



Coffee morning, Howwood

While most activities aimed to be intergenerational or to attract a mix of participants, often the type of activity would dictate who would attend. For example, coffee mornings were more likely to attract a mix of older people, bingo attracted all ages including children, while fitness classes and activities such as sewing attracted women.

Who attended your Winter Connections project?		
	Number of projects*	%
Women	24	68
Men	19	54
Children	19	54
Older People	16	46
People from ethnically diverse communities	10	29
Young people / teenagers	7	20
Families	6	17

\*out of a total of 35 responses. Note: All respondents provided more than one answer to this question

Of the 35 projects who provided feedback for this question, over two thirds stated that it was mainly women who attended activities, while just under half of all projects appealed to older people. An equal number of projects attracted men and children.

*Most attendees were ladies, outnumbering the men by about 4 to 1, mainly on the elderly side with our oldest attendee in her 90's and our youngest just turned 3 years old.*

Howwood Community Council

Almost 30% of projects drew in people from ethnically diverse communities compared with 14% last year. This could be explained by the higher number of projects funded this year that work specifically with ethnically diverse communities. A very small number of projects mentioned that individuals with mental health conditions or addictions attended their activities although these were not given as specific options in the feedback form.

*Our Winter Connections project provided support for individuals with a diverse demographic, including families with young children, older/vulnerable adults, people from ethnically diverse communities and individuals struggling with substance use. No individual was exempt from our activities; they were all linked by being negatively impacted by the cost-of-living crisis and experiencing social isolation. People accessed the project from all over Renfrewshire, and there was an even distribution between genders. Our largest demographic was primarily local families.*

STAR Project



Sewing2gether All Nations

## 4. Impact of the Programme

### 4.1. What did organisations learn?

Organisations were asked if, through delivering Winter Connections activity, they had learned anything about what their community wants or needs. The main learning point was that communities are continuing to struggle financially due to the cost-of-living crisis, creating a strong demand for affordable or free of charge activities and that there is a need to continue this support particularly for families during the summer holidays when schools are closed.

RIG Arts learned that there is a need to promote access to nutritious meals for families on low incomes and as a result they are now offering hot food and drink access at all their workshops.

The School of African Cultures found that there were issues around transport and the STAR Project discovered that many of their members were not able to attend as frequently as they wanted to due to issues around irregular bus timetables.

*Our sessions finished at 8 PM, and, particularly during December and January, some attendees had to leave early for fear of not getting home.*

STAR Project

The importance of communities having a safe space was a recurring theme throughout the feedback and project visits. Howwood Community Council found that the community needs a welcoming space to enjoy opportunities to be together and to meet with friends and form new friendships and that organised events for older people are essential for reducing social isolation and promoting wellbeing.



*People were thankful for a safe space to come together and take their minds off things - as such, we're likely to continue this activity through the "warmer" months. We were pleased to hear that people recognised our sessions as a 'safe place' that family members could be dropped off at - there appears to be a lack of knowledge around similar places.*

St Vincent's Hospice

Enjoying a craft afternoon at St Vincent's Hospice

In terms of the activities offered, Sewing2gether All Nations noticed that participants prefer to come along to the project when there is also an activity provided and that it is important to have some time before and after the activity to socialise. RIG Arts found that there is a strong desire for accessible and inclusive creative opportunities within the community and there was also a demand for inter-generational activities at Lochwinnoch Community Development Trust and a need to provide affordable activities for people with mental health issues.

The popularity of outdoor activities organised by Friends of Barshaw Park, and nature crafting events held by Inchinnan Development Trust suggests that there is an appetite to participate in activities that connect to the natural world. There are obvious benefits for mental and physical health as well as the well-researched benefits of connecting with others. CREATE Paisley are keen to continue to work with young people in Linwood to provide meaningful activities.

*We identified a clear demand for more youth provision in Linwood that is both free and accessible to all young people. CREATE is currently in the process of setting up a youth forum,*

*quite a few participants from our Linwood drop-in are very keen to participate. This forum will provide a platform for young people to have a voice and actively participate in shaping the youth provision in their community.*

CREATE Paisley



A busy Friday at Erskine Arts

## **4.2. What difference did the Winter Connections Programme make to participants?**

Organisations were asked whether they thought that the activities they had delivered as part of the programme had provided any benefits for those attending. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive with organisations highlighting several impacts from the programme.

A majority of those who completed feedback forms agreed that the programme activities had supported participants by connecting them to each other, with 92% of organisations reporting this benefit. According to 89% of organisations the programme also contributed

to reducing social isolation, while 83% thought that the provision of fun activities had been beneficial for participants. 81% of organisations thought that activities had encouraged new people to engage with the organisation. Other perceived benefits were creating a sense of belonging to the local community (78% of respondents), providing the opportunity to learn something new (72%) and reducing financial costs and helping people to learn about a new service in their area (67% each).

Benefit to people attending activities	Number of projects*	%
Connecting people to each other	33	92
Reducing social isolation	32	89
Providing fun activities	30	83
Encouraging new people to engage with the project/organisation	29	81
Creating a sense of belonging to the local community/neighbourhood	28	78
Providing the opportunity to learn something new	26	72
Reducing financial costs	24	67
Helping people to learn about a new service in their local area	24	67
Providing access to information/advice	22	61
Providing entertainment for children	17	47

\* out of a total of 36 responses

Activities brought people together, connected them with familiar and new faces and created space for generations to be together. Many of the comments from projects related to a feeling of family or feeling part of something giving a sense that activities created a sense of belonging and community cohesion. The new friendships and connections that were forged helped to reduce social isolation and created supportive networks for people to increase their confidence and resilience.



*There was such a need for community and that was confirmed when a large group of people sat at the table and talked and laughed, they were lonely and had come along to a place where they met more people and new friendships were formed.*

Rays of Hope

RIG Arts found that, for many of their participants who had experienced social isolation or marginalisation, engaging in creative activities, and building relationships with others in the community provided a supportive network that valued their contributions and experiences. Other projects experienced similar impacts.

*The programme has strengthened community bonds by bringing diverse people together around shared experiences of creative activities, English language learning, and celebrating festivals and national days in song and dance; our sessions bring a sense of belonging and collective responsibility for each other's well-being as relationships are built, providing peer support for the ups and downs of life everyone experiences.*

Sewing2gether All Nations



Celebrating Nowruz, Persian New Year

For some people attendance at the activities was a gateway to continued support and friendship. Inchinnan Development Trust reported that people were glad they had “braved the unfamiliar” and come along to participate in the nature craft activities because they had gained new friends.



*Enabled me to meet other first-time fathers and share experiences and receive important support from staff and volunteers. It's given me something important to look forward to each Saturday.*

HSRI participant

*It's just something to do. Somewhere to go. Friendly and warm. I like to think I made new friends and I'll see them around the town.*

Single male participant, struggling with social isolation and ASD, STAR Project participant



Craft activities at Inchinnan Development Trust

Many of the activities on offer helped to improve mental health and reduce stress, from Inchinnan Development Trust's nature crafting sessions to RIG Arts artistic workshops, demonstrating the therapeutic benefits of engaging in creative and outdoor activities.

*For many attendees, the sessions served as a source of respite from the challenges they may face in their daily lives, offering a welcoming and supportive environment where they could relax, unwind, and temporarily escape from stressors.*

RIG Arts

The programme offered the opportunity for many people to engage in new activities that they may not otherwise have had the chance to try. Many learned new skills or discovered new talents. At Community Circus Paisley children were able to try trampolining and circus skills and parents were able to participate in activities alongside their children and socialise with other parents. Encouragement from project leaders helped to increase confidence for some people.

*It was lovely to learn new skills and meet new people all in the beautiful surroundings of India of Inchinnan. Donna presented each session with so much enthusiasm and inspired us all just to have a go.*

IDT participants

*Every week we have seen people become more confident, more inclined to engage. The noise level at the different events has risen - a sure sign people are getting more relaxed and confident.*

Lochwinnoch Community Development Trust

RIG Arts discovered that the activities provided a sense of purpose for participants and some individuals gained the confidence to pursue further learning opportunities and submit their artwork to external arts exhibitions.

Just Dive In supported people to increase their confidence in water-based activities.



#### Case Study: Just Dive In CIC

John\*, a 65-year-old recent retiree, initially joined Just Dive In CIC as a spectator, accompanying his wife to her water confidence classes. With no prior interest in aquatic activities, he was content to observe from the sidelines.

Encouraged by the inclusive atmosphere and witnessing the joy and progress of participants, John decided to take a leap of faith and enrolled in the beginner scuba sessions. What started as a curiosity evolved into a passion, as John discovered not only a talent for scuba diving but also a therapeutic connection to the water that he had never anticipated.

John's journey from observer to enthusiastic diver exemplifies the inclusive and transformative nature of Just Dive In CIC's programme. His active participation has not only enriched his retirement years but also inspired others to step out of their comfort zones and explore new horizons.

\*name changed

Organisations commented that the programme had led to people discovering new venues and projects, helping to raise awareness of the organisation's work and the wider support available within the community. Friends of Barshaw Park reported that people had discovered their venue for the first time and plan to revisit, while St Mark's Oldhall found that the programme encouraged some people to come into their church led café for the first time.

Hosting Winter Connections activities has encouraged Ralston Out of School Care to develop their project, taking on board feedback from parents about activities that their children might be interested in trying.

*It in turn has given us new ideas to run more activity clubs for the children in the area.*

Ralston OSC

The offering of hot food and drink contributed to alleviating stress and financial strain for many families and individuals and helped to address food insecurity. Home Start Renfrewshire and Inverclyde found that the hot food helped to maintain attendance at a time of year when it can be challenging for families to go out.

*We found our groups were more consistently attended and families were staying for longer enabling them to save on their food and heating in their own homes as well as connect with others in their community. Our schedule of Groups is a crucial part of the Home-Start service and attendance is often a big step for families.*

Home Start Renfrewshire and Inverclyde



Active Communities project offered the opportunity to learn about nutritious food in a fun way and helped to improve young people's awareness of a healthy diet and increase their confidence to try new foods. In addition to activities and food, KLAS Care also provided access to clothing donations and toys at Christmas.

*Healthy snacks, Sewing2gether All Nations*

*Hot food and good company! I just really loved having somewhere to take the kids where I knew they would be safe playing with their friends, get their dinner, get a wee bit of help with homework and I got to relax for a while. It was like visiting with family and it really helped me over winter.*

Mum of a family of 6 living in Gallowhill who participated in the STAR Project

It was important to ensure that families could access support with dignity and, because the programme enabled access to food and wider support through participation in activities which were open to all, this helped to remove any stigma about accessing these services. Several projects also provided information and advice for parents through working with partner organisations, for example, Citizens Advice Bureau.

*Our Winter Connections project has resulted in community members in challenging circumstances experiencing improved connections (with themselves, others, and their community) and less isolation. Further, their wellbeing was improved through increased confidence, hope, and aspiration. Offering the community extended access to a warm space and including it as part of our main programme meant people did not feel stigmatised by accessing it.*

STAR Project

For some organisations, the impact for participants was so beneficial that they are continuing to fund their Winter Connections activities and food through alternative sources of funding, such as tea money and donations.

Feedback from libraries suggests that the snacks they provided were popular with children and were even more appreciated during holiday periods when there was no access to school meals. In addition, providing hot drinks for visitors encouraged them to stay longer in the library and socialise with others.

## Comments from attendees at library activities

*Library and staff are wonderful – a cuppa, a wee seat, a knit and natter and pleasure of listening to all the babies singing.*

*We have a gentleman who is in everyday, perhaps 2 or 3 times and has soup and coffee. So much so that he now has his own mug as we'd go through so many cups otherwise. On our late opening day, a Tuesday, he goes to Central in the morning and then comes to us in the afternoon. Not only does he have the tea and soup, but he also uses us as a warm space. He very rarely borrows a book or uses a PC but reads the daily newspapers. We like to think of our library as a warm friendly place where people feel comfortable, regardless of the purpose of their visit.*

*I am part of the knitting group in Renfrew library and am so pleased that I have joined as I suffer from anxiety and feel this group helps me immensely to socialise. If this was not available, I would feel isolated at home as I live alone.*

*We have a play session after our Bookbug sessions and some of the mums/grans/carers stay behind and have a tea or coffee and it gives them a chance to chat with other young mums. Many of them are in a position where they don't have friends their own age and many have formed bonds and not only meet at Bookbug but also at other times and have established friendships.*



Quiz at Renfrew library



Children at Ferguslie library

## 5. What did we learn?

As a funder we have learned that the following elements are important in supporting local voluntary and community organisations to deliver activities that are tailored to the needs of their community.

- A straightforward and accessible application process makes it easy for organisations to apply
- Well organised, friendly and supportive assistance alongside the smooth transition of funds enables organisations to focus on planning and delivering their activities
- Organisations appreciate the provision of good promotional materials to help promote their project
- Organisations value a named person to email or talk to about their project or funding application
- Having a feedback form that is easy to complete results in a higher rate of return of forms
- A flexible funding approach allows organisations to tailor their projects to the needs of their communities

*Clear communication about funding and applications. Useful resource pack supplied and great to have a visit from the funder to see our service in action and to hear more about other organisations in the programme.*

Home Start Renfrewshire and Inverclyde

*Renfrewshire Council's flexible funding approach allows us to tailor our projects to the specific needs and priorities of the Seedhill community. This flexibility ensures that funded activities are responsive to local contexts and can adapt to changing circumstances or emerging opportunities. Additionally, the reliability of funding from Renfrewshire Council provides stability and predictability for organisations hosting Winter Connections activities. This allowed us to focus on program delivery and community engagement without the uncertainty often associated with securing funding.*

RIG Arts

## **5.1. Areas for improvement**

Of the 34 projects that responded to a question about where the Winter Connections programme could be improved, nearly 30% felt that the programme did not need any improvements. The remaining projects suggested the following:

### **Promotion of the programme**

- Providing posters with blank spaces for projects to complete with Where, Who, When, How to book/who to contact
- New posters
- A QR Code poster that will link to all the activities
- More publicity for the programme including more social media coverage and advice on how to publicise activities more widely

### **Additional Funding**

More funding to cover overhead costs

*Small amounts of funding to continue clubs and activities would be good. We have purchased the hardware we needed but to continue the club for free we would need money for lets and snacks for the kids. It is something we could roll out to other areas, schools, libraries etc. if we had the funding and support.*

Ralston OSC

## Planning and timescale of the programme

Although the programme started a month earlier than last year, organisations would like the funding process to start earlier to help them to get everything in place and to provide more of a gap between approval of funding and starting projects. They would also like the timescales to be extended.

*Improvements could include securing more funding and initiating the planning process earlier. Extending the period of funding to cover the autumn months could also enhance the programme's impact and reach within the community.*

CREATE Paisley

*Would like to see an opportunity for groups to get support to continue activities year-round if they are successful. People attending our class are already dreading when it comes to an end just as they are getting into a routine.*

Thorn Athletic Community Trust

## Creating a Winter Connections Community of Learning

Some organisations were keen to network with other funded projects to share good practice and suggested the following:

- Support to connect different groups together to reach a wider audience
- Opportunities to network and build links with other funded organisations
- Offering additional support and resources such as capacity-building workshops, networking opportunities, or mentorship programs to help organisations develop their skills

*Encouraging collaboration and partnerships among your different funded projects could leverage resources and expertise more effectively, leading to greater impact and sustainability. This could involve facilitating networking events or creating platforms for knowledge sharing and collaboration among grantees.*

RIG Arts

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

The Winter Connections programme aimed to encourage people to connect and participate in activities in warm and welcoming spaces across communities in Renfrewshire. Feedback suggests that the programme continues to be successful in benefitting attendees by connecting them to each other and creating a sense of belonging to their local community. There is also evidence that the programme provides an inclusive and supportive environment for people to engage with services, helping to reduce social isolation, reduce financial costs and provide access to information and advice. The activities on offer were enjoyed by all ages and allowed access to new experiences.

Whilst the programme has been a great success, there are some recommendations to be considered if a similar programme is to be delivered in future.

**Recommendation 1** – Winter Connections projects are currently open to anyone, however feedback indicates that some projects would benefit from the flexibility to take a more targeted approach to some of the activities, for example, for older people or for those from ethnically diverse communities where there may be a need for activities for women only.

**Recommendation 2** - It may be helpful to set up a networking meeting with previously funded organisations to share good practice about the delivery of Winter Connections activities, and to support community connections at an organisational level.

**Recommendation 3** – Although the programme started earlier this year feedback from projects suggests that starting the funding process even earlier would provide projects with more time to plan activities.

## 7. Appendix 1

Organisations which hosted Winter Connections activity

Active Communities Scotland Ltd	Mountain Ash Club
Brick Lane Music Academy CIC	Our Place Our Families
CREATE Paisley	Pachedu
Community Circus Paisley	Paisley Methodist Central Halls
Erskine Arts	Paisley St George's Outreach Centre
Friends of Barshaw Park	Ralston Primary Out of School Care
Friends of Howwood Park	Rays of Hope
Foxbar Elderly Forum	Renfrew YMCA SCIO
Home-Start Renfrewshire & Inverclyde	Renfrewshire Rainbow Buddies
Howwood Community Council	Renfrewshire Effort to Empower Minorities (REEM)
Inchinnan Development Trust	RIG Arts
Johnstone Castle Learning Centre	ROAR – Connections for Life Ltd
Just Dive In CIC	School of African Cultures
Kickin' On	Scottish Afro Caribbean Arts Association (SACAA)
Kilbarchan Improvement Project	Sewing2gether All Nations
KLAS Care CIC	St Mark's (Oldhall) Church of Scotland
Langbank Swingpark Regeneration	St Vincent's Hospice Ltd
Linwood Baptist Church	The Thursday Club
Linwood Community Council	The Star Project
Lochwinnoch Community Development Trust	Thorn Athletic Community Trust
Loud n Proud	Twist and Hit Cheerleaders

A big thank you to all of the organisations who provided feedback, quotes, photographs and video links for this report.

Chief Executive's Service  
Renfrewshire Council  
Renfrewshire House  
Cotton Street  
Paisley  
PA1 1BR

[www.renfrewshire.gov.uk](http://www.renfrewshire.gov.uk)

