



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

UKSPF Place-Level Evaluation

Newcastle-under-Lyme - Final report

November 2025



Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government



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1 Introduction

1.1 UKSPF programme

The Government launched the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) in April 2022. It provided £2.6 billion of funding for local investment by March 2025, with an additional £900 million available for the transition year 2025-26. Local decision-makers worked with their local communities and partners to deliver interventions under three investment priorities: Communities and Place, Supporting Local Businesses and People and Skills. Places were empowered to identify and build on their own strengths and needs at a local level, focused on enhancing community pride and increasing life chances.

1.2 UKSPF place level evaluation

The UKSPF evaluation included 34 place level case studies across the UK focusing on specific localities. These aimed to understand local delivery and impacts, and to generate robust evidence on how effective combinations of UKSPF-supported interventions (and other publicly funded projects) within a locality work together to enhance community pride, life chances and other government missions, including local economic growth. Newcastle-under-Lyme (NUL) was selected as a place level case study as it offered an opportunity to examine implementation of UKSPF in a small local authority, with a relatively low per capita UKSPF funding, but which had previously received a high level of EU Structural Funds such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

1.3 Summary of place

The borough of NUL is a local government district situated in North Staffordshire, bordering Stoke-on-Trent to the East. It is predominantly urban, but there are several parks and green spaces throughout the borough. NUL has a population of 128,060.¹ Staffordshire also includes the Tamworth; another location selected for a UKSPF place level case study. The M6 motorway, which provides key transport links, runs through the centre of the borough, bordering the market town of NUL.

¹ NOMIS Population estimates - small area based by single year of age (2023)

Figure 1 Map of Newcastle-under-Lyme



Key population areas include NUL town, the village of Silverdale, the suburban area of Kidsgrove to the north, and Chesterton, which is a mix of residential and industrial zones. These towns are connected by a strong local economy, primarily driven by manufacturing, retail, and education, with Keele University being a notable institution in the borough, alongside the University of Staffordshire, both of which have received UKSPF funding for upskilling programmes.

The area contains several assets which offer potential for growth. NUL is rich in cultural and historical assets, reflecting its heritage as a historic market town. The Guildhall, a landmark since 1713,² has served as a civic and community hub, while St. Giles Parish Church and Holy Trinity Church showcase the town's religious history and stunning architecture. The Apedale Heritage Centre preserves the area's industrial past with a museum and former coal mine tours.

NUL's economic growth is driven by a combination of academic excellence at Keele University – attracting science and innovation enterprises at the science park, thriving retail and leisure sectors, strategic regeneration projects, and a growing focus on high-tech industries and sustainability. The area's economy has also seen recent opportunities for growth in the high-tech and science and innovation sectors, in line with national priorities around renewable energy and decarbonisation of local infrastructure.

The town's historic appeal, strategic location, and community-oriented events also play an important role in boosting tourism, attracting investment, and supporting local businesses. Initiatives have also

² Source: <https://www.search.staffspasttrack.org.uk/Details.aspx?&ResourceID=23370&SearchType=2&ThemeID=769#:~:text=Description:The%20Guildhall%20in%20Newcastle,on%20a%20bicycle%20to%20left.>

supported the social sector such as through volunteering at Kidsgrove or the development of the Homeless Hub for individuals impacted by homelessness in the local area.

NUL is a place with deep roots in culture and heritage, with attractions such as Queen's Gardens offering cultural value. The council hoped that interventions funded through UKSPF would increase footfall and spending from both residents and those from out of the region so that the area is increasingly recognised as a destination to visit and stay. The council also hoped that UKSPF would improve the local area for the community and support local VCSEs.

NUL's unemployment rate (for individuals aged 16 and over) was slightly lower (3.0%³) than the Great Britain average (3.7%⁴). The unemployment rate for NUL was also lower than the average across the West Midlands (4.7%⁵). However, NUL was also ranked in the bottom 20% for output per hour worked in the UK.

Income deprivation statistics highlight disparity in the borough. Nine of the 80 neighbourhoods in NUL were amongst the 20% most deprived areas across England and 16 of the 80 neighbourhoods were amongst the top 20% of least deprived areas across England⁶. Both the most and least deprived neighbourhoods were clustered around the larger towns within the borough, namely NUL and Kidsgrove.

Businesses in NUL are predominantly of "micro" size⁷ (88%⁸). This aligns with the average across Great Britain, where 89% of enterprises are classed as "micro". NUL's strategic location and transport links makes the borough attractive for larger enterprises to develop sites that help to connect their businesses across the country.

Just after the launch of UKSPF, NUL Borough Council (NULBC) launched its Council Plan for 2022-2026⁹ which identified four primary priorities:

- 1. One Council Delivering for Local People** which aims to enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of council services to better serve residents.
- 2. A Successful and Sustainable Growing borough** which promotes economic growth while ensuring environmental sustainability.
- 3. Healthy, Active, and Safe Communities** which encourage health, wellbeing, and safety among residents.
- 4. Town Centres for All** which prioritises revitalising town centres to be inclusive and vibrant spaces for the community.

The delivery and successful achievement of the four priorities rely on clear actions and interventions to improve NUL as a place and economic hub. The objectives of the UKSPF align well with the Council Plan 2022-2026.¹⁰ Both focused on boosting economic growth, improving local

³ <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157176/report.aspx?town=newcastle%20under%20lyme#tabempunemp>, October 2023 to September 2024

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

⁶ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc1371/#!/E07000195>

⁷ The definition for an enterprise of micro size is given by employment of 0 to 9 employees. Small is 10 to 49 employees, Medium is 50 to 249 employees. Large is 250+ employees.

⁸ https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157176/subreports/idbr_time_series/report.aspx?

⁹ NUL Borough Council (2022) Council plan 2022 to 2026. Available at: <https://www.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/policies-1/council-plan-2022-2026>

¹⁰ NUL Borough Council (2022) Council plan 2022 to 2026. Available at: <https://www.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/policies-1/council-plan-2022-2026>

infrastructure, and fostering community well-being (**Communities and Place**). The council's emphasis on revitalising town centres, promoting sustainable growth, and enhancing community safety mirrors the UKSPF's goals of reducing economic disparity, increasing employment opportunities (**People and Skills**), and supporting place-level investment (**Supporting Local Businesses**). Additionally, the council's plan to improve local services aligned with the UKSPF's ambition to empower local authorities to address specific regional challenges.

NUL has also invested resources and built upon previous funding streams, including the Towns Fund¹¹ (£23 million) and Future High Streets Fund¹² (£11 million). These additional sources of funding have supported programmes which aimed to deliver similar outcomes as UKSPF funded interventions but have not directly funded the UKSPF interventions. The only UKSPF interventions that have identified additional funding streams are Keele University projects ("Moving Ahead" and "Flourish") and Staffordshire County Council "Growth hub". These initiatives have secured match funding from other sources. NUL did not receive funding from either the Multiply programme or the Rural England Prosperity Fund.

NUL has been relatively stable in its parliamentary representation and overall Council governance in recent years. However, the general election in July 2024, saw a new Member of Parliament (MP) elected from the Labour party, previously a Conservative seat. Traditionally, NUL has been a consistent Labour led constituency, with the borough having Labour representation since the early 1900s. A town ward by-election in January 2025, saw a Labour hold for the control of the council. This did not directly affect delivery of UKSPF as plans were already established.

1.4 Summary of interventions to be evaluated

NUL had just over £4.8 million of core UKSPF budget in the first three years of funding, which was allocated across the three investment priorities: Communities and Place (£3.0m), Supporting Local Businesses (£1.4m), and People and Skills (£0.2m). An additional allocation of £0.3m was directed to general administration and management of the UKSPF funding, bringing the total budget to £4.9m (rounded). An additional £1.6m has been provided for 2025/26 which has been split by £0.3m for capital expenditure and £1.3m for revenue expenditure¹³. The full list of the intervention projects funded in NUL is provided in Appendix A.

Interventions under the '**Communities and Place**' investment priority had interlinked goals: supporting place, tourism and heritage; and supporting voluntary and community groups. The interventions included:

- Enhancements/refurbishments to cultural, historic and heritage institutions (local library, museums, etc.).
- Support and engagement with groups providing local arts, cultural, heritage and creative activities (e.g., Honey Box).

¹¹ A £3.6 billion fund investing in towns as part of the government's plan to level up our regions. For more details on the complimentary funding see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/towns-fund> (Accessed 20.03.2025)

¹² A £675 million fund for UK High Streets. The Future High Streets Fund aimed to support and fund local areas' plans to make their high streets and town centres fit for the future. For more details on the complimentary funding see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-high-streets-fund> (Accessed 20.03.2025)

¹³ See link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus/ukspf-2025-26-allocations>

- Improvements to local green spaces to enhance the aesthetic of the borough in the rural regions, including parks, and upgrading the infrastructure for improvements in environment and sustainability (e.g., Clough Hall Park enhancements).

Interventions under the '**Supporting Local Businesses**' investment priority are primarily related to entrepreneurial support. These included workshops and coaching, especially for sole traders. There was also funding for a range of business support offers, including training hubs, 'incubators' and 'accelerators' for local enterprise. The interventions also helped match local skills to employment opportunities, funded sustainability projects, and provided resources to boost innovation and productivity.

The **People and Skills** interventions aimed to support people to move towards employment, especially those that were economically inactive. The package of interventions covered employment experience and training to address local skills gaps, skills and training aimed at reducing worklessness, improving digital skills in the population, and developing green skills.

1.5 Methodology

Unit of analysis

The place level evaluation in NUL focused on the whole local authority area due to the predominance of local authority-wide delivery of interventions and the small size of NUL. However, the majority of interventions were concentrated in NUL's town centres, with limited delivery in rural and other urban areas. The evaluation looked at the processes and achievements of the initial three years of funding up to March 2025. Due to the timing of the evaluation's reporting period, full observation of the programme's transition year was out of scope.

In line with the borough council's interests, the following interventions were selected for in-depth exploration:

- **Communities and Skills:** Clough Hall Park Enhancements, Homeless Hub, Honey Box Programme, Volunteering for All, Community Connector Programme, and CML Community Hubs.
- **Supporting Local Businesses:** Growth Hub, BES Enterprise Coaching, University of Staffordshire: Business Support (ADTIA), Keele University: Moving Ahead, Keele University: Flourish, and Newcastle College Technical Innovation.
- **People and Skills:** Technical Innovation Upskilling Support; both interventions (Flourish and Moving Ahead) delivered by Keele University also fell under the People and Skills investment priority.

Other intervention projects were subject to local evaluation activity, the findings of which have been incorporated in this evaluation exercise.

Methodological approach

To guide the development of the evaluation approach, a Theory of Change (ToC) (see Appendix B) was developed. The ToC was informed, in part, through a ToC workshop that included representatives from the NUL UKSPF team, representatives from the local authority, and

contracted delivery partners. The evaluation activity in NUL included **process, impact and economic evaluation**. To provide evidence for these evaluation themes, a programme of 21 qualitative stakeholder interviews was undertaken across two rounds involving 19 individuals. These participants included local authority officers with oversight of the UKSPF, representatives of the local authority and contracted delivery partners. An additional, 13 interviews were conducted with beneficiaries of the Communities and Place and Supporting Local Businesses interventions. The evaluation also included a review of key programme documents, management information data and locally commissioned evaluation reports. Secondary data sources including results from the Community Life Survey were also reviewed and relevant results extracted. The impact evaluation employed a contribution analysis approach, a theory-based method that helps explain how different factors contributed to achievements of UKSPF in NUL. A Value for Money (VfM) assessment was conducted using the National Audit Office's (NAO) 4E's framework, focusing on the economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity of the programme. Further information on the evaluation methodology is provided in Appendix C and the contribution analysis approach and framework is provided in Appendix D.

1.6 Structure of the report

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 provides the process evaluation findings, focused on the design, implementation and oversight of the UKSPF investment in Newcastle-under-Lyme.
- Sections 3-5 present the impact evaluation findings, reporting in turn for each of the investment priorities.
- Section 6 summarises the economic evaluation findings, reporting on the economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity of the programme.
- Section 7 provides conclusions from the evaluation.

A series of appendices are included:

- Appendix A – Newcastle-under-Lyme UKSPF Theory of Change.
- Appendix B – Newcastle-under-Lyme UKSPF Process map.
- Appendix C – Newcastle-under-Lyme UKSPF Intervention Projects.
- Appendix D – Outputs, outcomes and expenditure data.
- Appendix E – Evaluation Methodology.
- Appendix F – Contribution Analysis Framework.

2 Process Evaluation

This section presents the process evaluation findings, drawing on the stakeholder interviews and a review of local documentation.

2.1 Fund Design

An internal group of NULBC officers and members of the Newcastle Shared Prosperity Board (NSPB) co-developed the original investment plan. This process included selecting the initial set of interventions to be delivered and appointing an external consultancy to help with the assessment of intervention applications and intervention design. External consultants were commissioned to support due to a lack of internal resources and capacity.

Following submission to NULBC, a total of 46 intervention Expression of Interests (EOIs) were eligible for consideration. The appointed external consultancy developed “prioritisation criteria” aligned with UKSPF eligibility criteria and the NULBC Council Plan 2022-2025¹⁴ to assess the EOIs. Following an initial review based on these criteria some EOI applicants were asked to submit full applications. The NSPB made the final selection of suppliers, reviewing the consultants’ evaluations and making decisions based on detailed discussions and further reviews. Weight was also given to organisations that NULBC had existing partnerships with, as it was felt likely that they would provide an effective ongoing service. Although this did not prevent some new partners being engaged. A total of 16 final intervention projects were selected to progress.

All the delivery partners interviewed reported that the process for submitting a funding proposal was straightforward. There were a few partners that had some minor difficulties with the application process, however, they noted that the NULBC were supportive of their application and provided advice and guidance when needed.

One of the main challenges in identifying interventions was the time scales associated with designing the fund, including when the funding was released. Local authority stakeholders felt that a start-up and mobilisation period would have allowed the borough council enough time to recruit and pull together resources to assess potential intervention quality and relevance to the UKSPF investment priorities themselves.

2.2 Fund Implementation

All the delivery partners interviewed, including those internal to NULBC, noted the straightforward approach to pulling together a proposal for consideration of UKSPF funding. There were a few partners that had some minor difficulties with the application process, however, they noted that the NULBC were supportive of their application and provided advice and guidance when needed. External partners also noted that the two-step EOI, followed by the full application was straightforward. NULBC were again noted as being supportive with applications.

¹⁴ NUL Borough Council (2022) Council plan 2022 to 2026. Available at: <https://www.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/policies-1/council-plan-2022-2026>

“If there were any questions during the application process, the [Local Authority stakeholders] were available to provide clarification.”

Delivery partner

Effective grant agreements were required to manage the newly established relationships with delivery partners. Legal teams drafted comprehensive grant agreement contracts that outlined financial commitments, deliverables, and timelines. These contracts held delivery partners to account for meeting their obligations. Developing these contracts was a challenge in NUL due to the NULBC's under-resourced legal service. A local authority stakeholder emphasised the importance of quickly developing and signing contracts to mitigate risks for both the council and delivery partners. Despite NULBC having all the agreements in place on time, concerns remained about the capacity of the council's legal team to manage the contracting workload effectively.

2.2.1 Profile of suppliers engaged

Through the EOI process, NULBC commissioned a mix of existing and new delivery partners. In some cases, the council engaged suppliers who had not previously worked directly with them.

One significant area of new engagement involved Keele and Staffordshire Universities. These institutions were selected as they could deliver location-specific business support, due to their strong local presence and this was the first time they had been financially supported by NULBC to provide business engagement and training.

2.3 Delivery of Activities

In NUL, the intervention projects were delivered either internally by local authority teams or externally through contracted delivery partners. Strong relationships were fostered with local businesses, academic institutions, and public sector organisations, such as the job centre plus. Regular informal feedback meetings, helped to facilitate discussions between various delivery organisations. These meetings enabled the transfer of learning between delivery organisations and fostered a supportive environment for the delivery of UKSPF.

The level of expertise of those delivering the interventions was mixed. Those delivering business support interventions typically had greater resource, capability, and capacity. This was because, for the academic institutions especially, the delivery partners had extensive experience and knowledge related to entrepreneurship, as well as pre-established networks within NUL's business ecosystems that were leveraged to source relevant experts. These established networks also meant that these delivery partners had an established pipeline of businesses to work with and an understanding of the needs of these businesses.

“... so [the business advisor] talks the same language as the people that he's advising, which does help. the other skills are to be a bit creative, so I think certainly as a [business related delivery partner], I'm in a really advantageous position that I can swap and change things dependent on the need of the people we're helping.”

Delivery partner

Some of the staff needed to deliver the interventions required very specific skill sets, such as the Mental Health Liaison officer role supported as a Communities and Place intervention. Another volunteering related intervention had pre-existing networks which meant the delivery teams were experienced in managing and supporting volunteers, including recruitment, placement, and ongoing support. This highlighted how organisations with pre-existing networks were at an advantage for rapid delivery.

2.3.1 Delivery enablers

Several key enablers supported the effective delivery of the UKSPF in NUL. Including:

- **The development of strong relationships during the delivery of the commissioned interventions:** intervention delivery teams frequently made use of the networks and relationships of one or more other interventions in NUL. Regular informal meetings and debriefs between delivery teams allowed for cross-project learning. These meetings fostered the opportunity to directly refer the beneficiaries of one programme to another, demonstrating a holistic package of interventions in NUL, aligned with the needs of the community.

"We have liked quarterly meetings in terms of bringing all those who have had funding together and being able to feedback on our projects and what's going on and it's through that that I've been able to network and link in with other providers."

Delivery partner

- **New collaborative relationships with academic institutions:** the collaborations with universities supported the delivery of multiple interventions, as the institutions were able to organise larger networking events and a week-long business festival.
- **Engagement with local organisations:** some delivery partners benefitted from engagement with local organisations to ensure their services reached specific target audiences. The collaboration of delivery partners with the Job Centre, for example, was particularly beneficial, as it allowed for direct referrals of individuals who would benefit from volunteering experience.
- **The UKSPF's flexible and adaptive approach:** Interviewees reported that UKSPF allowed for flexibility and adaptation, enabling a majority of delivery partners to adjust their plans to

meet the expected levels of intervention activity. This included, for example, changes in the shift patterns for students, who were then able to fit their volunteering commitments around their academic timetables.

"One of the benefits of the scheme is the diversity of things that you can fund, which is quite unusual with most funding streams."

Delivery partner

"One key thing has been the flexibility of the programme and how great that's been in terms of being able to evolve projects."

Delivery partner

2.3.2 Delivery challenges

The delivery of the UKSPF in NUL faced the following challenges:

- **Uncertainty associated with the transition from ERDF funding to UKSPF funding:** A few delivery partners reported that they were unsure how UKSPF funding would act as a substitute source of funding. The release of funding being delayed to January 2023, as opposed to the planned release in April 2022, further exacerbated these concerns and delayed the council's ability to plan and then implement the selected interventions. However, some delivery partners appreciated that funding was paid in advance once it came through.

"... it was a welcome relief to not have the same bureaucracy for making the claims as there was for ERDF. So, it gave us a bit more flexibility to respond to local needs."

Delivery partner

- **Suitable locations and procurement processes:** Capital projects, such as the acquisition and refurbishment of properties for homelessness interventions, experienced delays as it took time to find suitable locations and to complete procurement processes, this in turn posed challenges in meeting delivery deadlines.
- **Securing resident buy-in for capital projects:** Obtaining planning permission for some buildings was a significant hurdle, requiring efforts to get residents and local authorities on board with the project. This required plans to be tweaked and adjusted, though this did not cause too much of a delay in achieving wider project objectives.

2.4 Data Collection and Monitoring

Delivery partners were required to submit monitoring information on outputs and outcomes to NULBC, and subsequently Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) for each intervention funded through the UKSPF. A pre-defined set of outputs and outcomes were used to help measure and track intervention progress. These categories for reporting on UKSPF themes aimed to monitor and track all UKSPF interventions in a consistent and comparable manner. Most delivery partners interviewed viewed this as a useful and successful way of tracking progress, due to the transparency of data being shared across other interventions.

NULBC also monitored the progress of delivery partners through a mix of monthly informal reviews and quarterly formal reviews. This helped identify any deviations from expected levels of activity and allowed for timely remedial activity when required.

Comprehensive monthly reports were requested from each project which detailed the progress and outcomes of the interventions, including information about other funded projects managed by the delivery partner, key performance indicators, attendance figures, and summarised feedback from participant evaluation forms. The reports also identified any challenges to delivery and detailed the strategies used to resolve these challenges. NULBC also monitored the progress of all delivery partners through a mix of monthly informal reviews and quarterly formal reviews.

2.5 Programme Oversight and Governance

Oversight and management of the UKSPF in NUL operated at multiple levels including the establishment of a Partnership Board and a dedicated UKSPF Programme Team. The NSPB included MPs, representatives from the country and borough council, an education provider and local businesses. This board oversaw the management and decision-making processes for the UKSPF interventions and was appointed initially to support with decisions on which interventions were to be funded. Day-to-day programme management was the responsibility of the council's UKSPF Programme Team.

The Towns Deal Fund and university match funding was used to compliment the delivery of UKSPF interventions. For example, Keele University and the University of Staffordshire contributed their own resources or used Innovate UK streams to provide match funding for UKSPF interventions. Some of the UKSPF interventions were designed to complement other funding streams. For example, the Towns Deal Fund and Future High Streets Fund were already in place and UKSPF funding was used to enhance impact of these funds by running complementary schemes. The Towns Fund was used for capital investments in town centres, such as property acquisition, demolition, and refurbishment and UKSPF funding was used to support revenue projects that complemented these capital investments.

3 Impact Evaluation – Communities and Place

This section highlights the key outcomes that have been achieved by UKSPF funding for the Communities and Place investment priority in NUL, and how and why these have been achieved.

The Communities and Place interventions in NUL were designed to target improvements to the town centre and public green spaces, and fund arts, cultural and heritage events to attract visitors and tourists to key locations. Other interventions focused on refurbishing facilities and improving infrastructure, with the intended aim of improving public perception of the local area; and capacity building to create opportunities for community engagement and volunteering.

The evaluation used contribution analysis, which involved developing of a series of hypotheses about the expected outcomes from the UKSPF investment and testing available evidence to assess whether these claims could be supported. The evidence for evaluating the outcomes/claims included qualitative evidence from interviews with stakeholders and beneficiaries. Quantitative evidence was drawn from data from the Community Life Survey (CLS)¹⁵ and MI data on outcomes achieved across the investment priority. Full tables of output and outcomes are provided in Appendix E.

The following sections detail the assessment of each contribution claim in turn, presenting the evidence which supports or refutes the claims. The full contribution analysis framework is provided in Appendix D.

3.1 Improved Facilities

Communities and Place hypothesis 3.1: Refurbishing facilities and improving infrastructure leads to better public perception of specific local areas/facilities.

Public spaces, including green spaces and infrastructure in NUL town centre, were refurbished to improve the local area's aesthetic, accessibility, and functionality. This was expected to encourage greater use and positive experiences, leading to improved public perception.

Evidence overview and contribution assessment

Evidence about this claim draws on the MI data and qualitative interview insights. In summary, we found that:

- The MI data showed many individuals (3,617) reported an improved perception of facilities/ amenities.

¹⁵ The Community Life Survey is an annual, nationally representative survey of adults in England, commissioned by the UK government. It explores key themes such as social cohesion, volunteering, civic engagement, and well-being. The survey provides valuable longitudinal data that helps policymakers and local authorities understand how communities are changing over time.

- NUL UKSPF investment in Communities and Place funded improvements to a range of public places, in particular green spaces such as Clough Hall Park and canal area improvements. Positive feedback was captured through interviews with local authority stakeholders and delivery partners directly involved in the management of these projects.

Contribution assessment 3.1: Contribution claim supported.

NUL's UKSPF investment in Communities and Place activity funded improvements to a range of local infrastructure and facilities. The MI data showed positive sentiment amongst residents in terms of improved perceptions. Specifically, 3,617 people reported an improved perception of facilities/ amenities. This was good evidence of changed perceptions but it was not possible to draw any further conclusions on which improved facilities specifically were underlying these results.

Qualitative evidence from interviews with local council delivery stakeholders, however, provided more depth in terms of the improvements to greenspaces. Nature and greenspace enhancements were funded by UKSPF which improved the aesthetic across public greenspaces in NUL, leading to positive anecdotal comments from residents. Some of the refurbishments, such as those to Clough Hall Park, included the removal of overgrown hedging around the unused bowling greens and tennis courts. Other improvement included creating new play facilities. Overall, these refurbishments were reported by interviewed stakeholders as having created a more inviting and visually accessible space and provided an opportunity for future developments. The local council delivery partner reported generally positive feedback from residents:

"I think they [residents] appreciate the fact that the Bowling Greens weren't used, and it now looks a lot better than it did previously."

Delivery partner

The park also had new CCTV cameras installed, which local authority stakeholders perceived would help to improve the security amidst the ongoing fluctuations in antisocial behaviour in the town. On one occasion, the CCTV evidence was able to capture images of a person vandalising the area, which was shared with the police. The increased security was reported by stakeholders as expected to support an increased uptake and usage of the park, helping to reduce crime and improve the overall perception of the area. However, there was an isolated incident of vandalism to the CCTV facilities. Other green space enhancements across the park covered the canal area. Enhancements here were reported by local authority stakeholders to have included improved footpaths and tidier surroundings:

"We've got a canal, and we've increased that footpath, and vegetation has been moved. It's a more attractive place to go and do some visits."

Local Authority stakeholder

Data from the Community Life Survey showed a relatively high level of satisfaction with green spaces in NUL, although it should be noted that sample sizes were relatively small. In the 2023/24 survey, 71% (of 338 respondents) reported they were satisfied with green and natural spaces in the local areas. This level of satisfaction was maintained, with 72% (of 512 respondents) reporting the same opinion in the 2024/25 survey. It is not possible to directly attribute the UKSPF funded improvements to this result but it likely was a factor in maintaining this level of perceived satisfaction with green space.

UKSPF also funded some capital projects which aimed to improve local facilities beyond green spaces. This included a strong focus on refurbishing the borough's infrastructure in NUL town centre. For example, the CML Community Hubs initiative refurbished library spaces to transform them into multifunctional spaces. The renovation of the Philip Ashley Centre, a creative and educational facility, was reported by stakeholders to have helped to add aesthetically pleasing infrastructure within NUL town centre. Local authority stakeholders, however, reported some delays to other projects. The acquisition and refurbishment of properties for homelessness interventions, took time to find suitable locations and complete procurement processes, which posed challenges in meeting deadlines. This has pushed out the completion date of the Homeless Hub to December 2025, after which facilities will be enhanced and capacity for supporting rough sleepers will increase. As a result, any further improvement to perceptions of local facilities will not be evident until completion of projects at the end of the transition year.

Combining UKSPF funding with other public funding streams (such as the Towns Deal and Future High Streets Fund) was effective in supporting both capital developments and the necessary revenue activities to sustain and maximise the impact of interventions. The complementary use of funds allowed for a more holistic and sustainable delivery, with each funding stream addressing different needs (e.g., capital¹⁶ vs. revenue¹⁷ funding), and minimised duplication of funds. An example of this complementarity can be seen in the development of the Keele in Town building. In collaboration with Keele University, an empty 19th century building in the heart of NUL town centre has been refurbished into a mixed-use facility. The building is a space where Staffordshire businesses and non-profit organisations can host meetings and business events, along with areas for Keele students and staff to get together, to study, and to connect with the community. The Towns Deal is one of the primary funding sources, with UKSPF having an indirect impact by bringing relevant stakeholders together.

Evidence on public perceptions of these refurbished facilities specifically was not readily available. Stakeholders involved in delivering the projects reported increased usage of the facilities (see section 3.2) and perceived this to be an indicator of a positive view of them by users. Results from the Community Life Survey showed 74% of respondents were satisfied with local services and amenities but it was not possible to directly attribute these findings to these UKSPF supported improvements. It also wasn't possible to assess change in this perception as data from earlier CLS surveys did not have this result available at local authority level. Nonetheless this was a strong result in terms of facilities. More widely, the Community Life survey results from 2024/25 illustrated wider perceptions of the local area. Specifically, it showed 66% of survey participants agreed that they would recommend NUL to others as a good place to live and the same percentage would still

¹⁶ Capital: Funding for large-scale, long-term projects that create or enhance assets.

¹⁷ Revenue: Funding for ongoing operational costs and day-to-day running of services.

want to live in NUL in five years' from responding to the survey. Some 58% agreed that they were proud to live in the local area. A comparison with 2023/24 data showed minimal change across these measures. Again, attribution to UKSPF-funded improvements is not possible, so these results cannot substantiate the claim specifically

Alternative explanations

The evidence collected does not suggest that observed outcomes were the result of other programmes. Where available, MI data and interviews consistently attributed this outcome to the UKSPF interventions and support delivered during the initial three-year funding period. The existence of alternative explanations was unlikely.

Evidence gaps and limitations

As already reported, the Community Life survey results cannot be linked directly with UKSPF activity given the generalisability of results to an England context, rather than NUL specific. Assessing the full impact was limited by the ongoing delivery work in terms of improvements to the homelessness facilities and would need a longer period of measurement of perceptions.

3.2 Increased Footfall and Usage

Communities and Place hypothesis 3.2: Arts/cultural/heritage events attract more people to key locations/town centres. Events increase footfall by creating unique attractions and experiences that draw both residents and visitors to key locations.

Evidence overview and contribution assessment

Evidence was sourced from MI data, qualitative interviews and locally produced evaluation outputs. In summary, we found that:

- MI data signals positive uptake in the number of arts/ culture and heritage events as well as the quality of the events that had taken place.
- Locally produced data following events showed good levels of attendance such as 3,200 attending a living history medieval event and a Limelight Festival weekend, which saw a 220% increase in footfall in the town centre compared to a normal weekend.

Contribution assessment 3.2: Contribution claim supported.

In total, there were 74 community led arts, cultural, heritage and creative programmes delivered across the initial three years of UKSPF funding. Some 1027 individuals reported improved perceptions of the events that were held. There were good levels of engagement at these cultural and heritage events based on the MI data. Specifically, it suggested that there was an increased number of visitors as a result, with a figure of 65,475 visitors reported. It was not possible for the research team to verify this result but qualitative insights from interviews and locally produced evidence on individual events further supported the UKSPF's likely contribution to the increase in the number of individuals engaging in events and associated footfall to the town.

A NULBC brochure showing the outcomes and achievements of UKSPF, produced towards the end of the initial funding period, collated a range of evidence relating to events. The brochure highlighted the importance of a series of events held to mark the 850th anniversary of NUL. At the refurbished Philip Astley centre, the New Vic Theatre hosted a four week series of shows; celebrating the life of Philip Astley in NUL, which drew in over 7,500 visitors. The celebration both showcased the deep cultural heritage in NUL as well as bringing the community together. Similarly, the Celebrate Newcastle event showcased a living history medieval event, which featured three UKSPF supported dance performances and was attended by 3,200 people. Stakeholders involved in delivering these cultural and heritage events were positive that they generated visitor footfall through the town. For example, the Limelight Festival weekend saw a direct 220% increase in footfall in the town centre compared to a normal weekend. However, this event was only an indirect outcome of the UKSPF where shows at the event were delivered by the UKSPF funded Honey Box. A community-wide initiative, the “Beat the Street”, encouraged physical activity through interactive challenges and getting to learn more about NUL’s heritage through games and health competitions. Over 4 weeks, 1,441 players travelled more than 4,200 miles as they played games throughout NUL, resulting in 0.4 point increase in life satisfaction and equating to a social and economic value of £400 per adult participant¹⁸. The games promoted walking and cycling through the town. This provides strong evidence of the UKSPF’s contribution to increased footfall in the town centre, raising awareness of NUL’s history, and indirectly supporting health and wellbeing outcomes.

Stakeholders interviewed that were involved in delivering these cultural and heritage events were mostly positive that they generated visitor footfall through the town.

Alternative explanations

The evidence collected does suggest that observed outcomes were partially supported by the UKSPF. However, there is a likely attribution with other programmes due to some events being partially funded by the UKSPF. Nonetheless, the existence of alternative explanations was unlikely. However, external factors such as weather conditions, may have facilitated or impeded people attending the local events.

Evidence gaps and limitations

Whilst overall figures for footfall have increased, the contextual information on the local events is incomplete. A longer term assessment of visitor numbers is required to fully assess the impact of UKSPF on footfall and events having a lasting impact of generating town centre visits.

3.3 Increased Volunteering

Communities and Place hypothesis 3.3: Capacity building support creates more volunteering opportunities. By supporting organisations with resources, training, and systems this enables them to recruit, match, and sustain more volunteers effectively.

¹⁸ The data from the “Beat the Street” initiative was taken from the NUL phase 1 evaluation brochure.

Evidence overview and contribution assessment

Evidence drew on the MI data, evaluation brochure and qualitative insights. In summary, we found that:

- 250 volunteering roles were created because of UKSPF support, exceeding the target set.
- Providing in-depth support to volunteers, which was not possible before the UKSPF funding, led to better matching of volunteers with suitable opportunities.

Contribution assessment 3.3: Contribution claim supported.

Evidence strongly indicates that volunteer opportunities were created by NUL's UKSPF investment. MI data up to March 2025 showed 250 volunteering opportunities were created, significantly overachieving against the target of 18.

Several projects were key to this achievement. The "Volunteering for All" project in NUL was a new initiative funded through UKSPF. Prior to receiving the UKSPF funding, Support Staffordshire did not have a dedicated, on-the-ground volunteering service in NUL. The project successfully placed nearly 50 volunteers into roles, meeting their target despite challenges with staffing. These were direct additional volunteering opportunities that were created through the UKSPF funded project.

Other notable projects that supported volunteering in NUL included "Wild about Brampton" that focused on nature and wellbeing. 31 additional volunteering opportunities were created equating to 169 additional volunteering hours. This project helped to restore and enhance the wildlife pond in Brampton Park. Volunteers were recognised by project delivery stakeholders in supporting the development of a new community space. Families with young children were able to partake in nature-based activities, including seasonal story-times, and Nature Tots sessions, which introduced them to the importance of protecting wildlife. Community engagement activities were made possible through the efforts of the volunteers, helping the community come together.

Cross intervention collaboration also created awareness of additional volunteering opportunities. For example, students from some of the business projects were signposted to other UKSPF projects running local events and business festivals. These opportunities enabled students to gain experience and skills in event management through volunteering and helped increase event capacity.

An increase in volunteering opportunities supported by UKSPF was potentially a factor underlying data from the Community Life Survey where the proportion of respondents in NUL stating they participated in any form of volunteering in the last month increased from 27% in 2023/24 to 36% in 2024/25. This latter figure is above the result for the England average of 33%. It is not possible to directly attribute this to UKSPF.

Alternative explanations

The evidence collected in NUL does not suggest that observed outcomes were the result of other programmes. While volunteering was already established across Support Staffordshire and other

projects, MI data and interviews consistently attributed UKSPF to the expansion and continuation of volunteering opportunities. The existence of alternative explanations is unlikely.

Evidence gaps and limitations

The evidence to support this claim is somewhat limited, and it is largely dependent on output and outcome data provided to MHCLG, triangulated through interview insights. Longer term evaluation is needed to assess whether these volunteering opportunities are sustained over the longer term.

4 Impact evaluation – Supporting Local Businesses

This section highlights the key outcomes achieved through NUL’s UKSPF funding for the Supporting Local Businesses investment priority and how and why these have been achieved. The Supporting Local Businesses interventions designed to help businesses, to set up, innovate, expand, and create new job opportunities with the aim of boosting the local economy, improving business resilience, and contributing to the overall prosperity of the NUL community.

The evaluation used contribution analysis, which involved developing of a series of hypotheses about the expected outcomes from the UKSPF investment and testing available evidence to assess whether these claims could be supported. The evidence for evaluating the outcomes/ claims in this investment priority included qualitative evidence from interviews with local council and business programme delivery partners and participants of case studies obtained from a number of the funded projects. Quantitative evidence was drawn from the locally produced phase 1 evaluation brochure and MI data on outcomes achieved by different projects and the investment priority as a whole. Full tables containing the output and outcomes delivered are provided in Appendix E.

The following sections detail the assessment of each claim in turn, presenting the evidence which supports or refutes the claims. The full contribution analysis framework is provided in Appendix D.

4.1 Local Business Births

Supporting Local Businesses hypothesis 4.1: Business support programmes support the establishment of new businesses. Engagement with enterprise coaching and various other support programmes increased the number of businesses developed in NUL as a result of UKSPF

Evidence overview and contribution assessment

Evidence was sourced from MI data, stakeholder interviews, the phase 1 evaluation brochure and case studies. In summary, we found that:

- NUL’s UKSPF Supporting Local Businesses activity supported the creation of 44 new enterprises across the borough of NUL.
- Delivery partners interviewed also noted how the business festivals helped facilitate business-to-business relationships and, subsequently, enabled innovative ideas to be developed.

Contribution assessment 4.1: Contribution claim supported.

The MI data showed that NUL’s UKSPF Supporting Local Businesses activity supported the creation of 44 new enterprises. Of these 44, 25% were through strengthening local entrepreneurial

ecosystems and networking with organisations in the area. This suggests that the projects helped to bring businesses together to benefit from synergies (e.g., helping with contractor and supplier introductions) and minimise costs. These simple adjustments across the business ecosystem have led to business births, growing the number of enterprises across the area.

Local council and business programme delivery partner interviews also highlighted the success of attracting new business to NUL. One project delivery lead, for example, reported that they were able to provide support to new entrepreneurs that would not typically access support through the usual routes, such as seed funding or angel investment, for example. Some of the local businesses were much smaller in scale, and the Supporting Local Businesses projects were seen to fill a gap in support:

"They're not the type, they're not a big, high-growth business, so then they're not the type of people who would go to a university or a Chamber of Commerce. They like somebody to talk to as opposed to reading something on the internet"

Delivery partner

Local authority stakeholders also commented that initiatives have engaged a wide range of businesses, particularly micro-businesses with no more than 10 employees. Although, this is not so surprising as micro firms make up 88% (see 1.3 above) of the business population in NUL. These businesses have shown increased interest in the support provided and have joined various networks and now considered NUL as a viable area to either set up their business operations or expand into the area. Stakeholders and beneficiaries reported that a wider benefit of business festivals and relationship development was that it helped local entrepreneurs running small businesses to maintain their growth trajectory, and some found new markets for their products through discussions with the intervention's support coaches. For example, one beneficiary was able to expand their product's reach into the UK and internationally (UAE).

In conclusion, some businesses that accessed support, particularly through the coaching programmes and festival relationship development, were able to set up new operations within NUL. Most businesses that engaged with the UKSPF support seemed to be micro-sized (less than 10 staff) and therefore, the full impact of the UKSPF across the business population should not be generalised; albeit micro businesses make up most of the business population in NUL. Specific organic growth¹⁹ themes are discussed in more detail below.

Alternative explanations

The evidence collected in NUL does not suggest that observed outcomes were the result of other programmes. The interviews with delivery partners consistently attribute this outcome to the UKSPF interventions and support, often stating that interventions would not have taken place

¹⁹ Organic growth is a company's ability to increase its revenue, sales, and market share by using its own internal resources and capabilities, rather than through external means like mergers or acquisitions.

without UKSPF funding or not at the same scale. The existence of alternative explanations is unlikely. However, a few delivery partners did acknowledge the existence of other business support programmes which may have also contributed to business births indirectly – through coaching programmes. Other possible explanations for the increased business births included market demand and consumer trends driving business growth, or an improving local economy.

Evidence gaps and limitations

The evidence collected is focused on the micro-sized businesses across NUL. To understand the full extent of the support's impact on new and sustainable business births requires further data collection on the wider population of businesses supported. Business growth is a broad outcome that could be achieved through various organic²⁰ and inorganic²¹ methods. Further exploration of the types of growth should be considered over a longer-term horizon.

4.2 Increased Innovation and Productivity

Supporting Local Businesses hypothesis 4.2: Business support is associated with businesses developing and launching new products, technology, or processes, as a result of financial support, training, or advice. By providing training, advice, student interns and academic expertise, projects were able to provide additional delivery and research capabilities to local businesses, especially in terms of digital skills and product development. Business festivals provided networking and advisory services to help local businesses forge relationships across NUL.

Evidence overview and contribution assessment

Evidence was sourced from MI data, stakeholder interviews and case study insights. In summary, we found that:

- NUL's UKSPF Supporting Local Businesses provision overachieved its target on the number of businesses recorded as having adopted new or improved products or services; the number of organisations engaged in knowledge transfer activity following support, the number of research and development active enterprises, and the number of innovation active SMEs.
- Qualitative interview evidence points to positive outcomes from projects delivered by the local universities, particularly in digital innovation and app development.

Contribution assessment 4.2: Contribution claim supported.

Several programmes were introduced, such as the additional matched support through the Staffordshire Growth Hub, Newcastle Borough Business Connects, and BES Enterprise Coaching.

²⁰ Organic growth refers to “the expansion of a company's operations and revenue using its own internal resources and capabilities”. [Link](#)

²¹ Inorganic growth refers to “...a merger or takeover. A merger occurs when two businesses join to form a new (but larger) business. A takeover occurs when an existing business expands by buying more than half the shares of another business.” [Link](#)

New projects, that were not a continuation of previous funding streams, included engagement with local academic institutions, such as Keele University (Moving Ahead and Flourish) and the University of Staffordshire (ADTIA). Each project had a specific purpose to fill gaps in current support being offered across the borough, with business development being a key theme across all the projects.

4.2.1 Product development

UKSPF in NUL supported enterprises and entrepreneurs through a range of business support programmes that led to enhancements in terms of new products, or processes and tools that positively supported business operations. This was illustrated in the MI data where 51 organisations reported that they had adopted new or improved products or services, against a target of 12. Similarly, 154 enterprises that engaged in research and development (R&D) activity were supported in NUL against a target of 12. Both outcomes exceeded targets substantially, providing strong evidence of the programme's contribution to local product development and innovation.

Business beneficiary case studies also highlighted additional/ sped up product development and/ or fast-tracked delivery of new products. One business beneficiary reported that an app-based product had stalled due to a £15k funding gap. Through the Flourish programme, they hired a graduate who completed the app and sourced a server, enabling the product to be brought fully in-house. This saved the business beneficiary rental fees and gave them full autonomy in marketing the app. This beneficiary organisation reported how the project support enabled the business to have the intellectual freedom that they wouldn't have had otherwise (i.e., their app would have remained on a server with an external provider).

A business beneficiary of the ADTIA project received student support to transform their concept into a marketable product. Their idea was to develop a weight management app based on their sports-related expertise. They commented that:

"We've generally got the ideas, but we haven't got the know-how. So, the [ADTIA] project allowed us to bring in a student and academic support to allow us to move that project from an idea into an actual product "

Business beneficiary

These businesses highlighted that the programme support enabled them to improve their growth trajectories and grow more quickly than they expected. Without the UKSPF support, business beneficiaries have noted that it would have taken longer to develop their products, likely at a higher cost.

Business beneficiary case study – Digital product development and scale

Project: University of Staffordshire: ADTIA

The business beneficiary was a sole trader who planned to develop an AI-based platform for recruitment. This platform would allow the process to become more automated and cost-effective and enable the business to scale globally using the internet. This business operated internationally, with entry points into the UAE and potentially Saudi Arabia.

They had the concept of their recruitment product but needed the technical expertise of students and academics to develop the tool and bring it in-house. The beneficiary had previously worked with universities and a consultancy, but they did not have the resources to hire external consultants to develop the AI platform and host the app on an in-house server. For the initial proof of concept, the business used an external company to help develop the product AI; however, the handover required re-contracting for further development. The ADTIA project enabled the company to bring this work in-house through collaboration with an academically mentored student internship.

"The academic has quite a lot of resource, data and networks; with a background in launching tech products as well. So, it was great to understand in terms of what comes next."

"... ADTIA has helped me develop my own skills, my own expertise, and introduced me to some great people who I think are have a lifelong relationship with and potentially somebody who I'll employ in the business for the long term."

Business beneficiary

The business beneficiary noted that the project grew in scope during delivery and exceeded their expectations. The student developed the AI app and sourced the server to bring the product in-house, something the business beneficiary expected to have established much later in their growth plans.

In the 5-month follow up with the business, growth was notable with the business seeking investment to finish the software development for a commercial launch in October 2025 in UK and UAE. Another 6 AI models, as at the end of the ADTIA project, were developed and they have been initially approached by a Recruitment Technology investor.

4.2.2 Technological advancement

ADTIA was also successful in boosting productivity. A delivery partner interviewed highlighted a case where a business beneficiary received support to develop a feasibility study for streamlining the business. This led to investment in new technology, which increased productivity by 40%. This

demonstrates the ADTIA project's positive contribution to productivity through the adoption of new technologies.

4.2.3 Business festivals foster business collaborations

The business festivals, delivered by Keele University as part of the Flourish and Moving Ahead projects, were designed to boost innovation. The Work Innovation programme was highly successful in matching local businesses together through networking. It featured five days of entrepreneurship, innovation, women in business, and community networking, attracting nearly 100 people a day. Networking activities helped the business community to share learnings, this was echoed within the MI data with increased product development and R&D.

"We've got the business festival, which was the work Innovation programme, which we did this year. It was highly successful in terms of how we tried to demonstrate the five days of entrepreneurship, innovation, women in business and networking with community."

Delivery partner

Other initiatives at Keele University included Moving Ahead that supported business advancements and transitions which included Innovation Network events. These events aimed to connect academics and businesses across sectors to share knowledge, expertise and resources, and stimulate innovation and growth. These have been successful in helping to support 10 SMEs (as of FY 24/25 Q2, likely exceeded by end of project) in funding applications for R&D projects. This was predominantly to Innovate UK funding schemes.

Alternative explanations

The evidence collected in NUL does not suggest that observed outcomes were the result of other programmes. The interviews and MI evidence consistently attribute this outcome to the UKSPF interventions and support, often stating that interventions would not have taken place without UKSPF funding, or not at the same scale. The existence of alternative explanations is unlikely. Other possible contributing factors included increased demand for businesses, improving local economic conditions, other national business support programmes, or informal business support (such as through friends or family).

Evidence gaps and limitations

With the exception of the evidence from MI data, much of the evidence is self-reported by individual businesses and qualitative in nature and therefore is illustrative of the impacts achieved and could carry a degree of optimism bias. It is likely that more new processes and tools may have been adopted by businesses, but this won't be seen in MI data until the end of the transition period due to the timescales in implementing and evidencing the changes.

4.3 Job Creation

Supporting Local Businesses hypothesis 4.3: Business support enables businesses to hire new staff.

Business support programmes, particularly university based support projects, provided student interns the opportunity to undertake short-term projects within local businesses. This led to a few student hires, post-graduation, and an increased capacity/ appetite for local businesses to hire graduates in the future.

Evidence overview and contribution assessment

Evidence was sourced from MI data and stakeholder interviews. In summary, we found that:

- MI Data highlights business growth through additional job creation following business support: 115 roles (FTE).
- Flourish student and business feedback forms highlight success in graduate recruitment and matching labour supply and demand across the local area.
- Qualitative evidence gathered signalled some businesses reporting increased employment opportunities as a result of the support received. This includes both temporary and permanent positions, contributing to the overall employment rate in the area.
- Broader economic challenges, including deprivation in certain wards and the national economic situation, affected employment rates and the impact of interventions.

Contribution assessment 4.3: Contribution claim supported.

Business support programmes, such as the ADTIA project, have delivered strong outcomes for both students and businesses. Student interns reported feeling significantly more employable after their placements, and a few converted internships into paid roles. In cases where businesses accessed private funding, short-term jobs were created, and some students successfully negotiated full-time positions. One notable example is a student who remained with their host company as a business improvement consultant.

Businesses also highlighted the value of recruiting graduates who had gained practical, job-ready skills through these internships. This demonstrates that the programmes are not only improving individual career prospects but also strengthening the local talent pipeline for businesses. Early evidence suggests these collaborations are generating positive outcomes across multiple investment priorities. While multiplier effects have not yet been measured, the emerging trends indicate potential for wider economic impact.

Business beneficiary case study – Digital product development and scale (employment opportunities)

Project: University of Staffordshire: ADTIA

This business beneficiary had provided feedback at the interim stage of the evaluation and the insights below highlight the progress 5-months post initial engagement. The business beneficiary had given a student a work placement opportunity to support the development of a product. The beneficiary highlighted that they were keen in employing the student who supported the product development in a permanent position at their organisation.

The student, however, had secured another full-time role in the UK. However, the impact the student had on the business resulted in a continued desire by the beneficiary to employ them and support their long-term Sponsorship for a full-time technical role in the business, if they could secure investment (so that the student could remain in the UK).

The business beneficiary noted they would be interested in offering the student other opportunities in a new business venture as a tech co-founder. Based on the student's expertise and the amazing work they undertook with the ADTIA project, there would be a role to onboard them into the business.

An example of knowledge exchange came through the Flourish project where the university facilitated 25 fully funded projects, with students or recent graduates working with eligible businesses for up to 75 hours per project. Local businesses working across digital society and economy, sustainability, culture and creativity, etc. were able to recruit students for short-term internships funded through UKSPF. This exposed students to a working culture, whilst allowing local businesses to experience some of the local graduate talent expertise in areas they may not have had any experience in (computing, app development, etc.).

“Flourish is a great way of supporting local businesses whilst providing students a great opportunity to gain experience in a workplace setting. The student was professional and delivered an effective project that should help our business to grow”

Business beneficiary – Flourish case study extract

Looking across the feedback forms²² submitted to Flourish by business beneficiaries highlighted the strong benefits of hiring student interns/ graduates to support specific projects for their businesses:

²² The feedback form insights were provided by Flourish delivery partners for the evaluation only.

- All businesses either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the student had left their business in a stronger position. And almost all the businesses reported that they would be more likely to consider employing a graduate as a result of programme participation.
- 82% of businesses reported that the funding either made it possible to support a student or made the opportunity to fund a student more possible.

In terms of new hires, local businesses have been more open to considering recruiting graduates, which may not have been on their radar without the UKSPF funded projects. Graduates were paid via the projects which removed the cost for local businesses that may not have been able to fund graduate recruitment. This, in turn, gave graduates a salary and opportunity to apply their academic studies to real-life innovations, in turn supporting businesses looking to innovate.

The MI data reported that 115 roles (FTE) were created as a direct result of UKSPF funded business support projects. Just under 50% of these roles were created/ matched through enterprise infrastructure and employment/ innovation sites (i.e., enterprise networks set up by Moving Ahead and business festivals such as the Work Innovation Programme). This echoes the impact from the networking events and the business festivals described above in 4.2, where academics and students (interns supplied to businesses) were matched with local businesses, particularly around collaboration of digital skills and app-based development.

Qualitative insights from local authority stakeholders suggest that UKSPF-funded projects have likely increased employment among participating businesses, even though the borough’s overall employment rate has remained unchanged. One interviewee reported that some businesses created new positions, both temporary and permanent, as a direct result of the support received. These opportunities are contributing to job growth in targeted areas across the borough. However, due to time-lag issues, the study team could not verify these findings through secondary data sources.

Alternative explanations

The evidence collected in NUL does not suggest that observed outcomes were the result of other programmes. The interviews and evaluation report consistently attribute this outcome to the UKSPF interventions and support, often stating that interventions would not have taken place without UKSPF funding, or not at the same scale. The existence of alternative explanations is unlikely. Alternative explanations could include other business or employment support programmes, business establishment or growth due to other factors like market demand and improvements in the economy.

Evidence gaps and limitations

The primary gap in the evidence related to generalisability as job creation was mainly developed through business programmes, particularly university collaborations. The geographic coverage of jobs created is also unknown. No evidence was provided as to whether this was a lasting impact for local businesses.

5 Impact Evaluation – People and Skills

This section highlights the key outcomes that have been achieved by UKSPF funding for the People and Skills investment priority in NUL, and how and why these have been achieved. The People and Skills interventions in NUL were designed to enhance employability support and economic activity. These initiatives focused on providing tailored support to economically inactive individuals, marginalised communities, and those facing multiple barriers to employment, with the goal of fostering skills development, job readiness, and community integration.

The evaluation used contribution analysis, which involved developing a series of hypotheses about the expected outcomes from UKSPF investment and testing available evidence to assess whether these claims could be supported. The evidence for evaluating the outcomes/claims in this investment priority was primarily qualitative, consisting of interviews with delivery partners focused on employment projects and local council leads, participants and detailed case studies obtained from a number of the funded projects. This provided insights into beneficiary journeys and causal links between intervention and outcomes, and the extent to which targets were achieved. MI data on outcomes achieved by different projects and the investment priority as a whole was also used as a key evidence source. Full tables containing the output and outcomes are provided in Appendix E.

The following sections detail the assessment of each claim in turn, presenting the evidence which supports or refutes the claims. The full contribution analysis framework is provided in Appendix D.

5.1 Employment: Addressing Economic Inactivity

People and Skills hypothesis 5.1: Employability and skills-based learning programmes help individuals/beneficiaries become economically active.

The tailored training, practical experience, and support provided by employment programmes equipped individuals with the competencies and confidence needed to access and sustain employment opportunities.

People and Skills contribution hypothesis 5.2: Upskilling and qualification programs improve career prospects and lead to progress towards employment (e.g., job interviews).

By providing individuals with new qualifications and practical skills, upskilling and qualification programmes increase their competitiveness and readiness for job opportunities, enabling progress towards employment such as securing job interviews.

Evidence overview and contribution assessment

Evidence was sourced from stakeholder interviews, project feedback forms, case studies and MI data. In summary, we found that:

- The number of people reporting increased employability through interpersonal skills development was 539 as of March 2025. Just under 30% of these individuals participated in employment support projects for economically inactive individuals.
- All of those who gained basic skills following support (78) participated in projects for economically inactive individuals. This highlights the value of the People and Skills projects in helping those furthest from the labour market acquire essential skills to access employment opportunities.
- The Community Connector, Volunteer for All and Aspire Housing were key projects supporting economically inactive individuals. These projects offered bespoke services to support beneficiaries re-enter the jobs market. Support was provided for CV writing, interview skills, job search strategies and volunteering opportunities. Qualitative evidence from delivery partners interviewed and case studies illustrated how these helped to upskill economically inactive individuals to prepare for job interviews and working culture. This helped to boost confidence amongst economically inactive beneficiaries, that received support, to enter the jobs market.

Contribution assessment 5.1: Contribution claim supported.

Contribution assessment 5.2: Contribution claim supported.

Programme MI showed the number of people reporting increased employability through development of interpersonal skills was 539 with just under 30% of these individuals supported through employment support projects for economically inactive individuals. Another example was captured through student feedback upon completion of the Flourish project. Just over 93%²³ of students either “agreed” or “somewhat agreed” that Flourish had left them feeling more confident in their communication/ interpersonal skills.

Delivery partners interviewed highlighted that volunteers built soft skills through their voluntary work. This helped some volunteers find permanent employment across the borough. This was somewhat echoed through the MI data with 78 individuals reporting improved basic skills from project support, all stemming from projects targeting those that are economically inactive (including volunteers). Projects such as Aspire Housing and the Community Connector offered support for CV writing, interview skills, and job search strategies, as well as specific upskilling opportunities such as forklift truck driving and construction qualifications. Delivery partners interviewed reported some participants finding employment and staying in jobs for over 12 weeks, which was their key measurement of success.

The specific case study below demonstrates how an individual who accessed volunteering opportunities, built softer skills that helped them to secure permanent employment at an NHS hospital.

²³ Flourish student feedback results to the question: “As a result of my Flourish experience I feel more confident in my communication/interpersonal skills.” Students ranked on a Likert scale of 1 = Don’t agree, 5 = Agree.

Beneficiary case study – Volunteering & CV assistance helped a beneficiary to secure permanent employment

Projects: Volunteer for All & Aspire

The beneficiary was struggling with securing employment in IT, despite having an IT educational background. They often had to accept short-term roles outside their field to ensure financial stability. The main challenge was an outdated CV, which limited job opportunities at an application stage. Through the UKSPF cross project collaboration, the team at Volunteer for All put the beneficiary in touch with Aspire Housing. They were able to support the individual with an updated and professional CV refresh, helping the beneficiary with basic skills to support job applications.

The Volunteer for All representative discussed available IT-related volunteering roles and matched the beneficiary with the "Computers for Seniors" program, where they began volunteering. They started volunteering in January 2025, assisting seniors with basic computer skills, including Excel, Microsoft Word, setting tables, writing letters, and copy-pasting.

The volunteering role helped the beneficiary to improve their communication and teaching skills, especially in IT basics, by working directly with seniors and library visitors. The softer skills learnt helped the beneficiary secure a new job at a hospital as support staff, mainly cleaning, while they continue to look for a role directly in IT. The beneficiary is hopeful that future opportunities will allow them to secure an IT role in the UK.

The practical experience and confidence gained through volunteering has helped with job interviews and increased their ability to interact with others. Other benefits included personal wellbeing, avoiding isolation and maintaining motivation during a period of unemployment.

The beneficiary attributed their willingness to engage with the job market in part to the skills and confidence developed during volunteering and the CV support received from Aspire.

Other skills development projects provided technical training for niche sectors such as music. A delivery partner at the Honey Box project highlighted that four individuals who attended the technical workshops were now working as sound engineers in local venues, and two of them were employed by their team. Technical skills projects have allowed some participants benefit from technical job opportunities. As well as supporting economically inactive individuals, UKSPF provided support for projects that upskilled the local workforce and increased the quality of the labour supply across the borough.

"What I can say for fact is that at least four people who came through those courses, who were looking at possibly a technical career choice are now working in local venues as sound engineers."

Delivery partner

University-led projects, such as Flourish, reported improvements in students' confidence in core employability skills. Feedback from end-of-project surveys showed that students felt more capable in areas such as presentations, networking, digital skills, problem-solving, leadership, teamwork, motivation, creativity, and planning and organisation. Over 75% of respondents agreed or

somewhat agreed that their confidence in these skills had improved, and in most cases, more than 90% reported gains across these areas. These findings highlight the strong contribution of the Flourish university project in preparing students for the labour market.

The targeted student outcome of improved employment prospects, however, is overshadowed by the broader economic challenges facing the local area. Income deprivation persists across certain wards as mentioned above, and the national economic situation which had affected employment rates and the impact of interventions, noted by a local authority stakeholder highlight the limited impact the programme had across the area.

"Our employment rate has remained steady apart from a couple of wards that are recognised as highly deprived wards, where it's sort of dropped again [...] It's a bit of a challenge in terms of if you associate that with some of the work that we're doing and obviously just the national state of the economy."

Local Authority stakeholder

Alternative explanations

The evidence collected in NUL does not suggest that observed outcomes were the result of other programmes. The interviews and evaluation report consistently attribute this outcome to the UKSPF interventions and support, often stating that interventions would not have taken place without UKSPF funding, or not at the same scale. The existence of alternative explanations is unlikely. However, selection bias may have influenced the outcomes, as individuals who engaged with support services may have been more motivated or closer to job-readiness than those who did not.

Evidence gaps and limitations

Initial low engagement with some of the skills and training projects, especially online courses, that required additional engagement efforts to increase participation may have delayed/ continuing to delay initial impacts. The broader economic situation in NUL raises questions about the generalisability and sustainability of the outcomes described by these project delivery partners and beneficiaries. Quantitative data issues included the possible time lag associated with sustaining employment, and data covering the number of beneficiaries who secured job interviews following the UKSPF-funded support.

5.2 Improved Confidence in Labour Market Participation

People and Skills hypothesis 5.3: Interventions increase individuals/beneficiaries' confidence in entering the labour market.

Student internships and local training opportunities provided beneficiaries with greater confidence in pursuing career opportunities as they enhanced soft and technical skills through UKSPF funded support projects.

Evidence overview and contribution assessment

Evidence was sourced from stakeholder interviews and case studies. In summary, we found that:

- Projects supported individuals in developing confidence in applying for jobs. Confidence and skills (see 5.1 above) developed through volunteering opportunities had a further impact, helping individuals to sustain their employment and integrate into the workforce more effectively.
- Students who participated in the Flourish project reported a strong sense of confidence about entering the labour market after graduation. This confidence was reinforced by the development of key employability skills gained through the programme.

Contribution assessment 5.3: Contribution claim supported.

Building confidence among the local residents of NUL went hand in hand with the engagement of the economically inactive population across the borough. Confidence building has occurred through developing skills, support networks (sense of community) and in some cases friendships through the project engagement. A delivery partner at the Volunteering for All explained that volunteering helps build confidence, especially for individuals who have never been in work, by providing them with a sense of purpose and improving their well-being. For some participants, volunteering led to improved social skills and additional benefits to their mental and physical wellbeing.

"There's always wellbeing outcomes which often leans into the confidence side."

Delivery partner

The Honey Box project is an example of a volunteering support project that developed and improved soft/ technical skills. This led to a boost in confidence for beneficiaries to pursue a career in music. They highlighted that their increased knowledge of social media and regular use of high-quality videos produced by Honey Box, as part of their applications to gigs, acted as a confidence

booster and a valuable marketing asset of their personal skill set. They cited that the professional standard of these materials gave them the confidence to apply to showcase their music.

Honey Box also provided additional opportunities, as described in the case study below, for a beneficiary to showcase their music at live events. This experience helped the beneficiary to overcome stage fright and be open to receiving constructive feedback, without a feeling of judgement. In turn, this helped them to be more confident in actively pursuing a career in the music industry.

Beneficiary case study – Upskilling supports employment transition and confidence

Project: Honey Box

This case study follows a beneficiary's employment transition towards the music industry.

Honey Box organised educational sessions to address artists' struggles, including marketing-specific talks, that the beneficiary attended. These sessions were free and provided valuable insights into marketing strategies. The beneficiary attended three marketing workshops where practical advice on presenting oneself as an artist, creating impactful content, and budgeting for marketing efforts were discussed. Honey Box provided the beneficiary with footage from their performances, which the beneficiary used in applications to venues and promoters outside Stoke, aiding their expanding reach as an artist.

"It gives me that confidence to go out and say, yeah, OK, I'm an artist. Here's what I've got. You know, here's why I deserve to be given an opportunity. And I think it just makes you look a bit more serious."

Beneficiary

There was difficulty in balancing a full-time job with creative projects, leading to a lack of energy and effort for the beneficiaries' artistic endeavours. Alongside coaching sessions, Honey Box provided additional bespoke opportunities to help the artist progress their career through invitations to perform at a local event. The Honeycomb event was a live, ticketed gathering for artists to share their creative processes, songwriting methods, and to network for potential collaborations, providing a platform for both performance and peer learning.

The professional experience gained from being interviewed and engaging with other artists, prompted reflection on their own songwriting process and fostered new connections within the local music scene. This helped develop friendships and confidence for the beneficiary to continue to persevere and pursue a career in the music industry.

"It made me think differently and more about my songwriting process, (...) at the moment I'm trying to write songs differently than I have done before, and so it's really helpful."

Beneficiary

The beneficiary emphasised that while there are other forms of support available, nothing else offers the same level of comprehensive assistance and community as Honey Box.

In other projects, building confidence amongst students was the direct result of the Flourish project where student feedback highlighted both increased skills and confidence in securing employment opportunities post-graduation (see 5.1). 97% of student respondents that either “agreed” or “somewhat agreed” that the Flourish experience had left them feeling more confident that they could match their skill set to their desired role after university. They also felt more confident in speaking with employers and other professionals. This can be an initial hurdle for individuals entering the labour market for the first time.

Alternative explanations

The evidence collected in NUL does not suggest that observed outcomes were the result of other programmes. The interviews and evaluation report consistently attribute this outcome to the UKSPF interventions and support. The existence of alternative explanations is unlikely. However, selection bias may have influenced outcomes, as individuals who engaged with support services may have been more motivated or confident than those who did not.

Evidence gaps and limitations

Much of the evidence is self-reported by individual beneficiaries and qualitative in nature and therefore is illustrative of the impacts achieved and could carry a degree of optimism bias.

6 Economic evaluation

This section highlights the findings from the economic evaluation of NUL UKSPF investment. A Value for Money (VfM) assessment was conducted using the National Audit Office's (NAO) 4E's framework, focusing on the economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity of the programme. For each element, specific evaluation questions were developed and these were assessed using evidence from the process and impact evaluations. An overall assessment was then made as to whether the evidence demonstrated offering high, adequate or low value for money against the different evaluation questions and in turn the NAO framework. The conclusions and evidence are summarised in the following sections.

6.1 Economy

How far did the UKSPF interventions attract sufficient volumes of potential suppliers to ensure value for money?

The assessment of economy considered the total volume of potential suppliers and the capacity of the procurement and awards process to deliver interventions at the required quality in the required budgets. NUL actively reached out to existing partners and new suppliers to ensure they were aware of the open call and encouraged them to apply. 16 applicants were selected from 46 eligible expressions of interest. The minimum combined financial ask of submissions (6 applications did not submit costings) was: £9.39m from the 46 eligible submissions. Following the prioritisation exercise the combined ask was still £232k over the NUL UKSPF allocation. A further round of qualitative prioritisation was required by NULBC, implying a surplus of potential suppliers.

VfM assessment: High – strong evidence NUL reached appropriate numbers of suppliers through an open call process

To what extent did the procurement and award processes used ensured delivery of interventions to the required quality and value for money?

There was strong evidence from stakeholder interviews that the procurement process was robust and proactive. As a result of the interest in the open calls, a formal assessment process was used, in which consultants assessed tenders against prioritisation criteria including deliverability, cost-effectiveness and alignment with the borough's priorities. This included value-for-money assessments and prioritisation of projects delivering the greatest outcomes for the investment. The governance board made the final selection of suppliers through a review of the consultants' evaluations.

VfM assessment: High – good qualitative evidence that bids were scored against robust criteria and successful bids scored highly

How well were target timelines for the launch and delivery of interventions met and did this support delivery on budget?

Some challenges were experienced in terms of timescales for launch and delivery of UKSPF interventions with delays from the release of funds causing knock-on impacts to start-up and mobilisation. There was strong evidence from stakeholders of proactive management of UKSPF, with local council delivery partners that were interviewed highlighting the flexibility of funding mechanisms to account for adjustment in project scope and budget to accommodate changes to timelines. Additionally, formal and informal reviews helped identify potential deviations from expected timelines and allowed for correction. As a result, very few projects had not completed delivery of expected outputs. Due to a shorter period of delivery however, some outcomes have not yet been realised.

VfM assessment: High - qualitative evidence of proactive management by NUL to effectively manage UKSPF investment to budget and timescales, despite delays in funding flowing down from government

To what extent did the delivery of interventions meet initial expenditure expectations?

The final total expenditure of UKSPF in NUL at the end of March 2025 was in line with the total budget available, indicating effective **budget management** (see Table 11 in Appendix E). Some underspend in the People and Skills and Supporting Local Businesses investment priorities was appropriately reprofiled within the investment priorities and across the Communities and Place investment priority. This represented acceptable changes to the expenditure of the UKSPF allocation without overall budget implications.

VfM assessment: High - cost data indicated NUL's total expenditure was in line with the budget available.

Overall, this evidence collectively supports the conclusion that the project has been managed economically, ensuring that the funds were used efficiently to deliver high-quality interventions. The management of funds using a structured tender award process and proactive management by the external funding officers has ensured that the interventions delivered were of high quality and provided on balance high value for money in terms of economy. Local Authority stakeholders noted that the lack of capacity within a small local authority required the use of consultants to deliver a large suite of projects through the UKSPF.

6.2 Efficiency

Our assessment of efficiency focused on how the UKSPF investment in NUL converted inputs and activities into outputs.

To what extent did the interventions deliver the number of outputs initially expected and within the expected budget?

Our assessment focused on how well the interventions delivered the expected number of outputs within the allocated budget (see Appendix E). Evidence indicated that the UKSPF investment in NUL largely met or exceeded the initial output targets. Specifically, for the Communities and Place investment priority, all 9 output categories met or exceeded 100% of the initial expectations. Similarly, the Supporting Local Businesses investment priority saw all five output categories exceed 100% of their targets. However, the People and Skills priority only had 9 out of 11 output

categories which exceeded 100% of their targets. These results are also mirrored within the qualitative interviews, with stakeholders praising UKSPF projects for achieving what they set out to do. The People and Skills investment priority started in 2023/24 (year 2), therefore was expected to be less advanced than projects funded under the other two investment priorities.

VfM assessment: High - output data indicated NUL exceeded the expected number of outputs in many of the categories with few projects underachieving

How did the interventions secure the maximum number of outputs given the budget allocation?

The UKSPF interventions secured a maximum number of outputs given the budget allocation, achieving output targets and maintaining cost efficiency. This was assessed by calculating unit costs for a small number of key outputs. For example, the UKSPF unit cost in NUL per business supported with non-financial support and/or grants under the Supporting Local Businesses investment priority was £1,757²⁴. Comparatively, this is below benchmarks from the ERDF programme, on which much UKSPF provision was based, which ranged from just under £2,000 up to over £80,000 per enterprise supported. The median was around £9,400 based on assessment across 392 projects²⁵. Similarly, the UKSPF unit cost per economically inactive participant supported under the People and Skills investment priority was £2,633²⁶, which is comparable to other employment support programmes. Specifically, a National Audit Office report from 2022²⁷, presented a unit cost of £2,429 per participant supported by the Restart Scheme which was introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to support long-term unemployed people. This is the most comparable estimate given this programme covered the same time horizon as UKSPF (between 2022 and 2025). In the same report, unit costs were also presented for the Work and Health Programme (£1,560) and the earlier Work Programme (£1,760) the former being more comparable to UKSPF as it focused on economically inactive disabled people. Caution must be taken when interpreting these estimates given these figures have not been adjusted for inflation.

Whilst the UKSPF unit cost is higher, it can be assessed as offering good value for money, when acknowledging the other comparable programmes are significantly larger in terms of the scale, which would offer some efficiencies. No unit costs were calculated or compared for the Communities and Place investment priority outputs given the variety of activity and the absence of readily available and comparable benchmarks.

VfM assessment: High – NUL's output unit costs were in line with expected level and comparators

²⁴ Calculated for NUL using the total UKSPF budget spent all projects which aimed to support businesses and dividing this by the number of businesses supported.

²⁵ Wavehill (2023) National Evaluation of English ERDF Programme 2014-20 - Unit Cost Analysis Paper. Available at : https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6761ae7426a2d1ff182534de/European_Regional_Development_Fund_2014-2020_Unit_Cost_Analysis.pdf

²⁶ Calculated for NUL using the total UKSPF budget spent by the one project under this priority funded as E33 interventions which focused on supporting people, including those who are economically inactive, to progress towards and into sustained employment and the outputs associated with these projects.

²⁷ National Audit Office (2022) The Restart scheme for long-term unemployed people. Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/the-restart-scheme-for-longterm-unemployed-people.pdf>

How effectively did the interventions combine UKSPF with other funds to achieve outputs?

The efficiency assessment also considered how effectively the interventions combined UKSPF with other funds to achieve outputs. Several of the UKSPF intervention projects in NUL attracted significant amounts of match funding. Two projects garnered match funding from Keele University attracting £346k in total for staffing and in-kind funding. No other parallel funding programmes were received by NUL other than through a supporting capacity for existing funds (Future High Streets and Towns Deal Funds).

VfM assessment: Adequate – evidence indicated some success in combining funds, but with limited examples.

On balance, looking across all aspects of the efficiency assessment of the UKSPF investment in NUL, it demonstrates a **high level of value for money in respect of efficiency**. The interventions largely met or exceeded their output targets within the allocated budget, achieved cost efficiency in delivering outputs, and in some cases successfully combined funds to somewhat enhance output achievements.

6.3 Effectiveness

Our assessment of effectiveness is determined by how well outputs are converted into outcomes and impacts.

To what extent did the interventions deliver the number of outcomes / is expected to deliver the number of outcomes initially expected and within the expected budget?

The assessment of effectiveness focused firstly on how well the **interventions delivered the expected number of outcomes within the allocated budget**. Evidence indicated outcome measures met or exceeded all but one initial outcome expectation across the three pillars. The Supporting Local Businesses investment priority saw 6 out of 7 outcome categories meet or exceed 100% of their targets, with only one outcome related to the number of projects arising from funded feasibility studies not aligning with expectations.

VfM assessment: High – NUL UKSPF investment broadly achieved or exceeded their outcomes targets/initial expectations.

How did the interventions achieve the maximum number of outcomes given the budget?

Effectiveness was also assessed by considering unit costs for key outcomes achieved by the UKSPF investment and comparing them with other interventions. However, due to the wide variety of outcomes achieved, and the lack of disaggregated expenditure data linked to each outcome, it was not possible to calculate a unit cost for outcomes achieved for any of the investment priorities. However, qualitative evidence indicates that businesses receiving support through the Supporting Local Businesses investment priority and beneficiaries of the People and Skills interventions reported significant progress and positive outcomes, underscoring the wider value of the intervention.

VfM assessment: High - NUL's outcome unit costs were in line with expected levels.

To what extent did the outcomes achieved meet the needs of the local area?

The assessment also considered how well the outcomes achieved **met the needs of the local area**. Stakeholders were broadly positive on the ability of UKSPF to meet local needs. Local stakeholders highlighted early engagement with local partners, particularly those who had previously received EU funding, as important in ensuring interventions aligned with local needs. A robust consultation process allowed for incorporating community feedback into the design and delivery of projects ensuring they were targeted at community priorities. Reduced bureaucracy was also praised for bringing greater flexibility and therefore the opportunity for the investment planning process to tailor provision to local needs. Beneficiaries cited projects focused on reducing homelessness as serving to support local needs as they were targeted on the most vulnerable local populations, such as the Mental Health Liaison and the Discharge Officer funded through the UKSPF, and support received to transition into permanent accommodation from UKSPF interventions.

VfM assessment: High – qualitative evidence from stakeholders that UKSPF provision met local needs

Overall, the effectiveness assessment of the UKSPF investment in NUL demonstrates **value for money**. The interventions largely met or exceeded their outcome targets within the allocated budget, achieved cost efficiency in delivering outcomes in line with other interventions and successfully addressed local needs.

6.4 Equity

The assessment of equity focused on whether the initial target beneficiary groups and areas were the most appropriate to receive UKSPF support and were reached over the course of delivery.

Have the interventions been delivered to the target beneficiary groups set out in the initial plans?

The investment plan for UKSPF in NUL was designed to support those most disadvantaged or at risk of being left behind, with a strong focus on reducing homelessness, supporting economic growth, those individuals currently economically inactive, and improving health and wellbeing across the borough. A review of the various documents that made up NUL's investment priorities identified the main target groups for the different investment priorities:

Table 1: Investment plan target groups

Investment priority	Target groups
Communities and Place	Vulnerable/deprived communities, homeless people, artists/musicians, voluntary and community groups.
Supporting Local Businesses	SMEs, potential start-ups, sole traders, key sector business e.g. immersive technologies, social enterprises.
People and Skills	Unemployed/economically inactive, young people, low-skilled, marginalised

There was extensive qualitative evidence that the interventions had delivered outputs and outcomes for these target groups. Local stakeholders, particularly beneficiaries, highlighted their engagement with interventions and the impact of these interventions, noting that the majority successfully reached their intended target groups. However, targets for these groups were not specified upon inception of the implementation of the UKSPF in NUL and so comparison of achievement against expectations is not possible.

VfM assessment: High - Strong qualitative evidence that support was delivered to target beneficiary groups.

To what extent were the initial target beneficiary groups / areas the most appropriate to receive UKSPF support?

The open call process used across all investment priorities in NUL specifically sought to generate a diverse range of projects that covered many of the target beneficiary groups (economically inactive, homeless locals, local businesses etc.). Targets were defined quite broadly from the start of UKSPF. Stakeholders confirmed this assessment, praising the broad reach of interventions, though noting a lack of projects that engaged with multiple barriers to employment, such as health issues, including mental health, and economic challenges.

VfM assessment: Adequate - qualitative evidence that initial target beneficiary groups were the appropriate to receive UKSPF support though some contradictory evidence that the most appropriate groups benefitted.

Overall, the equity assessment of the UKSPF investment in NUL demonstrates a high level of value for money. The interventions were well-targeted to the most appropriate beneficiary groups and areas, and the outcomes achieved were highly relevant to the local needs. This indicates that the UKSPF investment was effectively managed and delivered, providing high value for money in terms of equity.

7 Conclusions

The UKSPF has been a significant initiative aimed at enhancing local investment and community development. In NUL, the fund has been instrumental in driving various projects under the three investment priorities: Communities and Place, Supporting Local Businesses, and People and Skills. This section summarises the key impact findings about each investment priority and provides an overall assessment of the programme's success in NUL, along with key lessons learned from the process evaluation.

7.1 Process review

Several key lessons have emerged from the implementation of the UKSPF in NUL:

- **Flexibility and adaptability:** NUL demonstrated proactive management, and autonomy over spending. Interventions were shaped based on ongoing demand and local needs. The ability to reallocate funds and adapt to changing circumstances was crucial in addressing challenges in timescales.
- **Adoption of a commissioning approach:** The adoption of an open prospectus approach brought greater transparency to the commissioning process and enabled UKSPF funding in Tamworth to reach a wider range of local organisations, including smaller VCSE groups.
- **Funding cycles and contracting:** Across all priorities, funding cycles and short-term contracting were regarded as a source of inefficiency, particularly from a knowledge transfer perspective.
- **Strong partnership working was a key enabler:** The establishment of a dedicated UKSPF Partnership Board, building on the strong partnership working that existed in NUL, and proactive management by funding officers and NULBC ensured effective governance and high-quality delivery across all investment priorities.
- **Collaboration and networking:** The opportunity for delivery partner organisations to interact and collaborate with other UKSPF projects was beneficial in enhancing the support available to participants and fostering a sense of community. For Supporting Local Businesses in particular, collaboration meant that the local authority could refer businesses to complementary services and academic partnerships creating a more holistic support package.

7.2 Impact of UKSPF

Communities and Place

To what extent did the UKSPF interventions achieve the outputs and outcomes set out in the Investment Plan and what factors contributed to this achievement?

NUL's Communities and Place investment priority delivered a range of interventions focused on town centre improvements, cultural and heritage events, and capacity-building for voluntary and community organisations. The programme delivered physical improvements, including the restoration of green space areas such as Clough Hall Park and the refurbishment of town centre buildings like the Philip Astley Centre, canal refurbishment and tree planting. The Communities and Place interventions largely met or exceeded the outputs and outcomes established in the Investment Plan. The programme delivered 74 community-led arts, cultural, and heritage events, and the creation of 250 volunteering opportunities—significantly surpassing original targets. NUL's Communities and Place investment priority delivered a range of interventions focused on town centre improvements, cultural and heritage events, and capacity-building for voluntary and community organisations. There were also refurbishments to town centre buildings such as the Philip Astley Centre, CML and the Keele in Town mixed use space. These building refurbishments contributed to marginal increases in visitor numbers and improved engagement with local heritage assets. While the Community Life Survey data indicated a modest rise in community pride and satisfaction among residents, the overall impact on public perception was difficult to attribute solely to UKSPF due to concurrent larger-scale regeneration projects through other funding streams, such as the Future High Streets Fund. Key factors contributing to this achievement included strong partnership working between the council, delivery partners, and local organisations; the flexibility and adaptability of the UKSPF funding, which allowed for responsive adjustments to local needs; and the leveraging of existing networks and collaborative relationships.

Over what timescales have impacts been achieved, will they be sustained and are longer term impacts expected?

Impacts for Communities and Place have been achieved primarily over the initial three-year funding period (2022–2025), with many outputs, such as facility refurbishments, community events, and volunteering opportunities, delivered and evidenced within this timeframe. Some outcomes, like improved public perception of local facilities and increased community engagement, have already been observed through management information and survey data. However, certain impacts, particularly those linked to capital projects (e.g., the Homeless Hub), will only become fully apparent after project completion in late 2025 or beyond.

Supporting Local Businesses

To what extent did the UKSPF interventions achieve the outputs and outcomes set out in the Investment Plan and what factors contributed to this achievement?

The Supporting Local Businesses projects largely achieved or exceeded the outputs and outcomes established in the Investment Plan. The programme supported the creation of 115 full-time jobs and the development of 44 new enterprises, surpassing original targets. Projects funded through UKSPF enabled local businesses to access tailored support, including training, advice, student internships, and academic expertise, particularly through partnerships with Keele University and the University of Staffordshire. The university projects (Moving Ahead (KU), Flourish (KU) and ADTIA (SU)) helped to develop strong relationships amongst academics, students and local enterprise who were able to access expertise to develop products and source local talent. These interventions led to increased business growth, innovation, and productivity, with 51 organisations adopting new or improved products or services and 154 research and development active

enterprises reported, both well above target. Key factors contributing to this achievement included strong collaboration between the council, academic institutions, and delivery partners and the leveraging of established networks to reach micro and small businesses.

Over what timescales have impacts been achieved, will they be sustained and are longer term impacts expected?

Key outputs such as job creation, new enterprise development, and increased innovation were evidenced within the initial three year funding period. Longer-term impacts are expected, particularly as businesses continue to benefit from improved skills, ongoing partnerships, and access to new markets and support networks established through UKSPF interventions. However, continued monitoring and further measurement will be needed to fully assess the durability and wider legacy of these outcomes beyond the funding period.

People and Skills

To what extent did the UKSPF interventions achieve the outputs and outcomes set out in the Investment Plan and what factors contributed to this achievement?

The People and Skills strand of the UKSPF in NUL delivered strong progress against its intended outputs and outcomes, particularly in supporting individuals facing barriers to employment and those who were economically inactive. The programme enabled a significant number of residents to access tailored employability support, skills development, and volunteering opportunities, with 539 people reporting increased employability through interpersonal skills development and 78 individuals gaining basic skills as of March 2025. Projects such as Community Connector, Volunteer for All, and Aspire Housing provided bespoke, person-centred support, including CV writing, interview preparation, and sector-specific upskilling, which helped participants move closer to or into employment. The success of these interventions was underpinned by strong collaboration between delivery partners, the flexibility to adapt support to local needs, and the integration of volunteering as a pathway to build confidence and work-readiness. Additionally, partnerships with local employers and educational institutions ensured that training was relevant and responsive to labour market demands. While some challenges were noted, such as initial low engagement with certain skills projects and the broader economic context, the evidence indicates that the People and Skills interventions made a meaningful contribution to improving employability, confidence, and labour market participation among target groups.

Over what timescales have impacts been achieved, will they be sustained and are longer term impacts expected?

The impacts from People and Skills projects have been realised primarily during the three-year funding period (2022–2025), with notable progress in employability, skills development, and labour market participation among target groups. Many immediate outcomes—such as increased confidence, acquisition of basic and interpersonal skills, and successful transitions into employment or volunteering—were observed within this timeframe. While some benefits, such as improved confidence and skills, are likely to persist, continued engagement, adaptive support, and monitoring will be essential to ensure that gains are maintained and that longer-term impacts, such as sustained employment and reduced economic inactivity, are fully realised beyond the funding period.

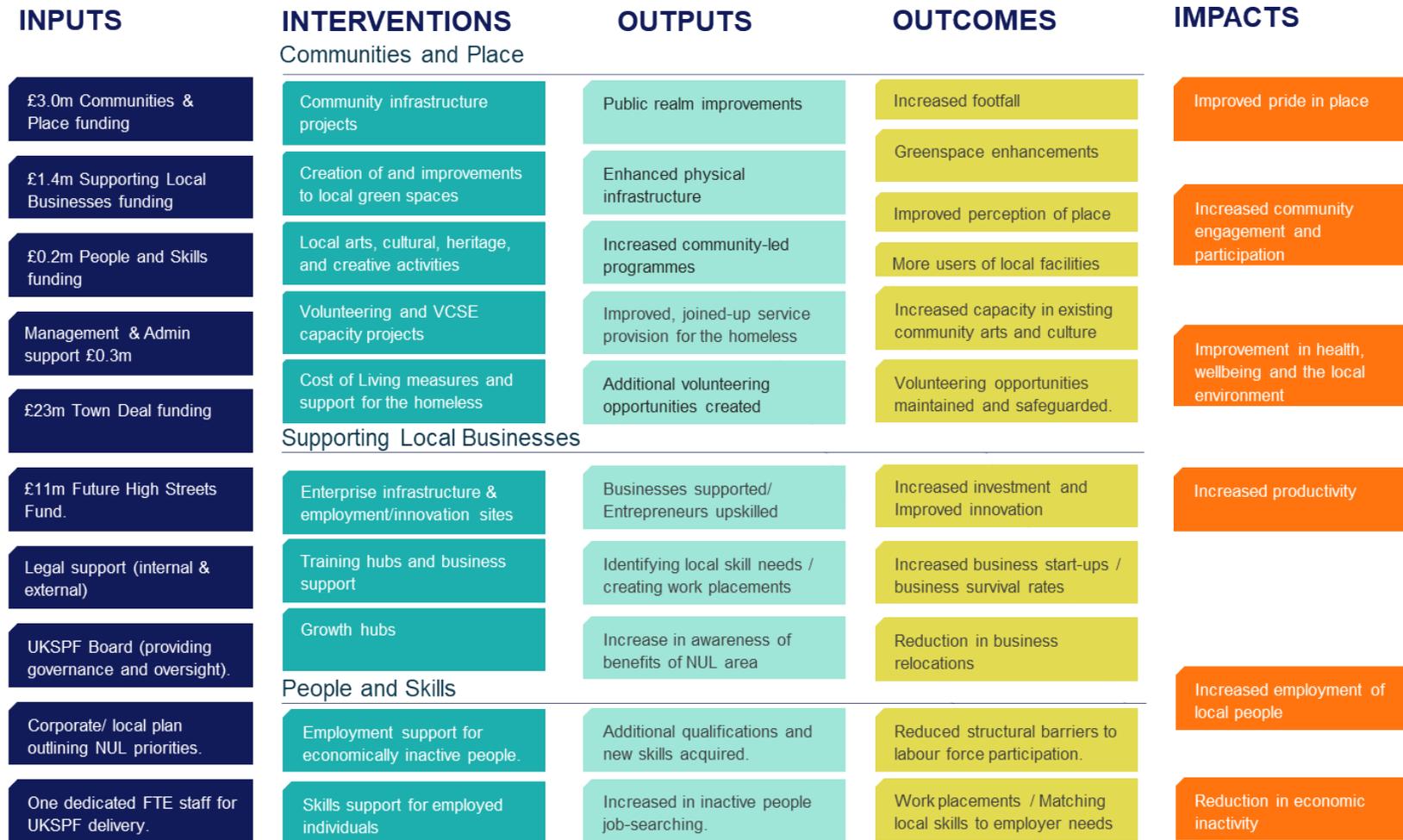
7.3 Value for money

A VfM assessment was conducted using the NAO 4E's framework, focusing on the economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity of the programme. The evidence collectively supports the conclusion that the UKSPF investment in NUL has been managed economically, ensuring that the funds were used efficiently to deliver high-quality interventions, however it is important to note that some of these conclusions are based on incomplete evidence and so some assumptions were made. There are also portions of outcomes data for which the window of observation has not been long enough to see their full realisation. As such, for these elements it is too early to draw robust conclusions on value-for-money. However, despite this, the assessment has found that the management of funds using a structured tender award process and proactive management by the external funding officers has ensured that the interventions delivered were of high quality and provided **on balance high value for money in terms of economy**. Looking across all aspects, the efficiency assessment of the UKSPF investment in NUL demonstrated a **high level of value for money in respect to efficiency**. The interventions met or exceeded their output targets within the allocated budget, achieved cost efficiency in delivering outputs, and in some cases combined funds to enhance output achievements. Overall, the effectiveness assessment of the UKSPF investment in NUL demonstrated a **high level of value for money**. The interventions largely met or exceeded their outcome targets within the allocated budget, achieved cost efficiency in delivering outcomes in line with other interventions and adequately addressed local needs. Finally, the **equity assessment** of the UKSPF investment in NUL demonstrated a high level of value for money. The interventions were successfully delivered to beneficiary groups and areas, and the outcomes achieved were at least adequately relevant to the local needs.

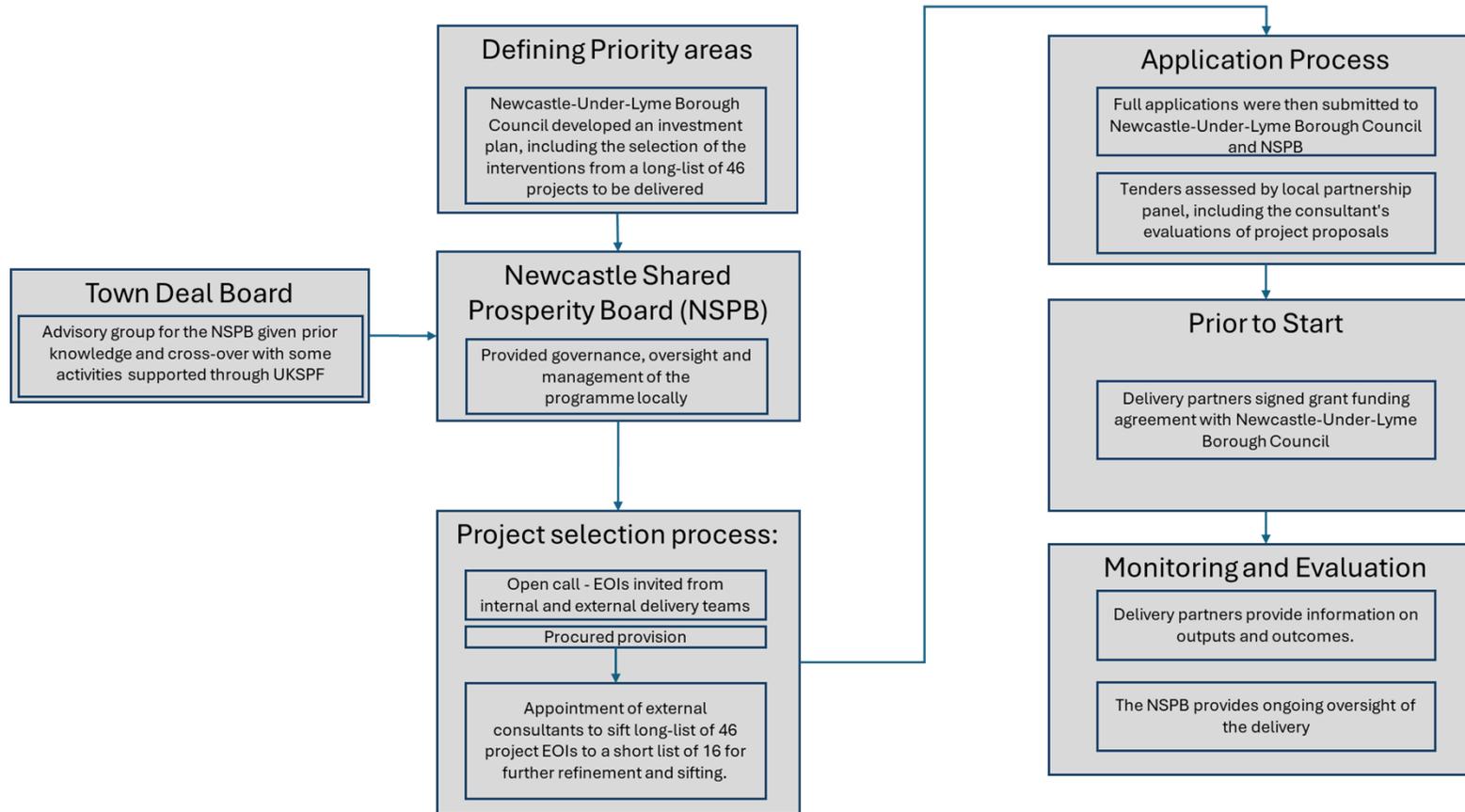
In conclusion, despite the challenges and due to these enablers, UKSPF in NUL has made a positive impact, achieving positive outcomes across all three investment priorities. This report captures the impacts up to March 2025; it is expected further positive outcomes and greater evidence of impact will be achieved by the end of the transition year in March 2026.

Appendix A: Theories of Change

Figure A 1 NUL Theory of Change



Appendix B: Process map



Appendix C – NUL UKSPF Intervention Projects

Table A 1 Intervention projects

Communities and Place		
Intervention project name	Project description	In scope for place level evaluation
CML Community Hubs	Establishment of community hubs to enhance local engagement and provide spaces for community activities.	Y
Newcastle 850th Anniversary	Celebration of Newcastle's 850th anniversary through various events and initiatives to boost community pride.	Y
Nature and Wellbeing	Initiatives promoting the benefits of nature on mental and physical health, encouraging outdoor activities.	Y
Canal Connectivity	Enhancements to canal areas to improve accessibility and recreational opportunities for residents.	Y
Clough Hall Park Enhancements	Upgrades to Clough Hall Park to provide better facilities and encourage community use.	Y
Outreach Mental Health Worker	Deployment of a mental health professional to support community members in need.	N
Nature Recovery in Urban Spaces	Projects aimed at restoring and preserving natural habitats within urban settings.	Y
Epicentre for Circus - Philip Astley Project	Development of a circus arts centre honouring Philip Astley, enhancing cultural offerings in the area.	Y

Homelessness Hub	Creation of a centralised facility to provide services and support for the homeless population.	Y
Beat The Street	Community-wide initiative encouraging physical activity through interactive challenges.	Y
New Vic Theatre – 850th Event	Special event at the New Vic Theatre celebrating the 850th anniversary of NUL.	Y
Kidsgrove Workshop	Establishment of workshops in Kidsgrove to promote skills development and community engagement.	N
Community Connector	Initiative to link community members with services and support networks.	Y
Promotional Videos & Photos	Creation of promotional materials to highlight community projects and initiatives.	N
Honey Box	The Honey Box project focuses on the support of musicians in the Staffordshire region, hosting monthly shows in front of an intimate audience and providing upskilling through trainings on audio/ sound engineering etc.	Y
Volunteering for All in Newcastle	Programmes to encourage volunteering, enhancing community involvement and skill development.	Y
Discharge Officer	Appointment of an officer to assist with patient discharge processes, improving healthcare efficiency.	N
BES Enterprise Coaching	Coaching services to support new and existing enterprises in business development.	N
Kidsgrove Town Hall Repurposing	Renovation of Kidsgrove Town Hall to serve new purposes, boosting local business opportunities.	N

Security Marshalls	Deployment of security personnel to ensure safe business environments.	N
Flourishing Keele (KU)	Collaboration with Keele University to promote business growth and innovation.	Y
Moving Ahead (KU)	Initiatives with Keele University to support business advancements and transitions.	Y
Advanced Digital Technologies Innovation Accelerator (SU)	Accelerator programmes in partnership with the University of Staffordshire to boost digital technology innovations.	Y
Chamber Growth Hub	Establishment of a hub to support business growth and networking opportunities.	Y
Brampton Wedding Venue	Development of a wedding venue at Brampton to attract events and boost local economy.	N
Work Innovation Conference	Organisation of conferences to promote innovative work practices among local businesses.	Y
Newcastle Community Connects	Initiatives to connect community members with local businesses and services.	Y
Feasted	Culinary project aimed at promoting local food businesses and culinary skills.	N
Newcastle Borough Business Connects	Programmes to link businesses within the borough for mutual support and growth.	Y
Brampton Business Development	Initiatives to support business development in the Brampton area.	

People and Skills

Project name	Project description	In scope for place
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		level evaluation
NSCG Technical Innovation Upskilling Support	Programs to enhance technical skills and support innovation among residents.	Y
EEE4 Disadvantaged Upskill Project	Initiatives aimed at upskilling disadvantaged groups to improve employment opportunities.	N
NULBC Green Projects	Projects focused on environmental sustainability and green skills development.	N

Appendix D: Outputs, outcomes and expenditure tables

Table 2 Communities and Place Outputs Achieved

Intervention / Output	Amount of green or blue space created or improved (M2)	Amount of public realm created or improved (M2)	Number of amenities/facilities supported/created or improved	Number of events/participatory programmes	Number of local events or activities supported	Number of organisations receiving grants	Number of people attending training sessions	Number of trees planted	Number of volunteering opportunities supported	Number of potential entrepreneurs provided assistance to be business ready	Number of organisation receiving non-financial support	Number of commercial space completed or improved (M2)	Number of organisations receiving financial support other than grants	Number of People Reached	Number of projects successfully completed	Number of Tourism Culture or Heritage assets	Number of neighbourhood improvements undertaken
E01: Improvements to town centres & high streets						6				1	92				2		
E02: Community & neighbourhood infrastructure projects	820		15		114		41	19500	2	54	39	3	19		12		
E03: Creation of and improvements to local green spaces	600	500				15		12300			9				2		
E04: Enhancing existing cultural, historic & heritage institutions offer		195	6	98	112	6	46		45		256	6	59	23635	6		8
E06: Local arts, cultural, heritage & creative activities		60	7	95	75	9	145		36	98				58956	8		7
E07: Support for active travel enhancements									3								
E09: Impactful volunteering and/or social action projects				52		3					16		65	38259	1		7
E11: Capacity building & infrastructure support local groups	460			45		10	168	19500					78	136			7
E12: Community engagement schemes, local regeneration					19			19800	21	8	25				11		
Total	1880	755	28	290	320	49	400	71100	107	190	428	9	221	120986	42	29	0

Source: May 2025 programme monitoring data provided by NUL Borough Council²⁸

²⁸ Due to inconsistencies to the targets specified in MHCLG MI data targets and outputs data is based on NUL provided data and those data specified in the investment plans

Table 3 Supporting Local Businesses Outputs Achieved

Intervention/Outputs	Number of decarbonised plans developed as a result of support	Number of commercial buildings completed or improved	Number of enterprises receiving financial support other than grants	Number of enterprises receiving grants	Number of events/participatory programmes	Number of enterprises receiving non financial support	Number of potential entrepreneurs assisted to be enterprise ready	Number of local events or activities supported	number of people attending training sessions	Number of people reached	Number of potential entrepreneurs assisted to be enterprise ready	Number of Tourism or Culture of Heritage assets created or improved
E17: Development & promotion of visitor economy		1			21			37		258		7
E18: Supporting Made Smarter Adoption						38	8					
E19: Investment in research and development at the local level			112			26				29	21	
E20: R&D grants supporting innovative product & service development				28	16	54		19			13	
E21: Development of innovation infrastructure at the local level				8	19	81		34			79	
E22: Enterprise infrastructure & employment / innovation sites		2				98		49		165	51	
E23: Strengthening local entrepreneurial ecosystems						140		13		324	45	
E24: Training hubs, business support offers, incubators			98	12		62		205			9	
E30: Business support measures to drive employment growth	2		12	9	39	256		11		689	66	
E32: Investment in resilience infrastructure and nature based solutions				3		10		20	25	250	8	
Total		3	222	60	95	765	8	183	230	1715	292	7

Source: September 2024 programme monitoring data provided by NUL Borough Council²⁹

²⁹ Due to inconsistencies to the targets specified in MHCLG MI data targets and outputs data is based on NUL provided data and those data specified in the investment plans

Table 4 People and Skills Outputs Achieved

Intervention/Output	Effective working between keyworkers and additional services	Number of economically inactive people engaging with keyworker support services	Number of economically inactive people supported to engage with the benefits system	Number of people accessing mental and physical health support leading to employment	Number of people attending training sessions	Number of people receiving support to gain a vocational licence	Number of people receiving support to gain employment	Number of people receiving support to sustain employment	Number of people retraining	Number of people supported onto a course through providing financial support	Number of people supported to access basic skills courses	Number of socially excluded people accessing support	Number of people supported to gain a qualification	Number of people supported to participate in education	Number of people taking part in work experience programmes	Number of volunteering opportunities supported	People supported to engage in job-searching	Number of people in employment engaging with the skills system
E33: Employment support for economically inactive people	15	112	79	125	45		68	11	21	125	15	325			15		201	
E34: Courses including basic, life & career skills					212		78			5		5	98	112	4	31	46	
E35: Enrichment & volunteering activities	95	16	5	39			189	18					39	25		29		
E36: Increase levels of digital inclusion, essential digital skills		212																
E37: Tailored support for the employed to access courses		10	8							29								22
E38: Local areas to fund local skills needs				42	25						11	22	12	12	15	15		56
Total	110	350	92	206	282	0	335	29	21	159	26	352	149	149	34	75	247	78

Source: September 2024 programme monitoring data provided by NUL Borough Council

Table 5 Communities and Place Outcomes Achieved

Intervention / Outcome	Improved engagement numbers (number of people)	Improved perceived/experienced accessibility (number of people reporting)	Improved perception of facilities/amenities (number of people reporting)	Increased footfall (number of people)	Increased number of projects arising from funded feasibility studies (number of projects)	Increased number of web searches for a place (numerical value)	Increased users of facilities/amenities (number of users)	Jobs created as a result of support (FTE)	Number of volunteering opportunities created as a result of support (number of volunteering roles)	Increased use of cycleways or paths (number of users)	Increased users of facilities/amenities (number of users)	Number of community led arts cultural heritage and creative programmes	Increased visitor numbers (number of people)	Jobs safeguarded as a result of support (FTE)	Improved perception of events (number of people reporting)	Increased take up of energy efficiency measures (number of households)
E02: Community & neighbourhood infrastructure projects	1568	2580	1965					8		20	15695	11				1004
E03: Creation of and improvements to local green spaces		875				1256	11456	1	26			5	3566	3	12	
E04: Enhancing existing cultural, historic & heritage institutions offer	8658		1652	50252		235		2	19			5	5562	9		
E06: Local arts, cultural, heritage & creative activities	1500	1620		48952			11000	21	49			26	17585	1		
E07: Support for active travel enhancements	10															
E08: Campaigns to encourage visits and exploring of local area						2										
E09: Impactful volunteering and/or social action projects	4256				3			3	86		45	27	10212	7		
E11: Capacity building & infrastructure support local groups	115							9					28500			
E12: Community engagement schemes, local regeneration								5	68		110		50		11	
E14: Relevant feasibility studies					1				2							2
Total	16107	5075	3617	99204	4	1493	22456	49	250	20	15850	74	65475	20	1027	2

Source: September 2024 programme monitoring data provided by NUL Borough Council

Table 6 Supporting Local Businesses Outcomes Achieved

Intervention/Outcomes	Increased business sustainability	Increased number of enterprises supported	Increased number of projects arising from funded feasibility studies	Jobs created as a result of support (FTE)	Number of enterprises adopting new or improved products or services	Number of organisations engaged in knowledge transfer activity following support	Number of Research and Development active enterprises	Increased footfall	Increased Visitor numbers	Increased number of innovation active SMEs	Number of new enterprises created as a result of support	Number of early stage enterprises which include EWS	increase in visitor spending
E17: Development & promotion of visitor economy				2				35400	12650				
E18: Supporting Made Smarter Adoption				7	19					8			20
E19: Investment in research and development at the local level	12	29			29		45						
E20: R&D grants supporting innovative product & service development							20						
E21: Development of innovation infrastructure at the local level		5			3								
E22: Enterprise infrastructure & employment / innovation sites	11	31		53		10					16		20
E23: Strengthening local entrepreneurial ecosystems		166		15		178					11		
E24: Training hubs, business support offers, incubators				22		4					8		22
E26: Growing the local social economy												59	
E30: Business support measures to drive employment growth		48		16		298	89				9	65	16
Total	23	279	0	115	51	490	154	35400	12650	8	44		78

Source: September 2024 programme monitoring data provided by NUL Borough Council

Table 7 People and Skills Outcomes Achieved

Intervention/Outcome	Number of people engaged in job searching following support	Number of people in education/training following support	Number of people in employment (including self employment) following support	Number of people reporting increased employability through interpersonal skills development	Number of people in supported employment	Number of people with basic skills following support	Number of economically inactive individuals engaging with benefits system following support	Number of people engaging with mainstream healthcare services	Number of people sustaining engagement with keyworker support and additional services	Number of active or sustained participants in community groups as a result of support	People gaining a qualification or completing a course following support	Number of people experiencing reduced structural barriers into employment and into skills provision
E33: Employment support for economically inactive people	358	168	11	158	78		245	10	78	9		
E34: Courses including basic, life & career skills						245						
E36: Increase levels of digital inclusion, essential digital skills				15					21			
E37: Tailored support for the employed to access courses				165			46	12			159	5
E35: Enrichment & volunteering activities							242		84	15	11	
E38: Local areas to fund local skills needs			68	201					135			
Total	358	168	79	539	78	245	533	22	318	24	170	5

Source: September 2024 programme monitoring data provided by NUL Council

Table 11 Total Expenditure by UKSPF Priority³⁰

	UKSPF total spent (£)	UKSPF allocated (£)	% of total allocation spent
Communities and Place	2,984,018	2,954,190	101
Supporting Local Businesses	1,449,776	1,479,604	98
People and Skills	208,000	208,000	100
Admin	194,380	194,380	100
Total	4,836,174	4,836,174	100

³⁰ A small amount of funding was reallocated from Supporting Local Businesses investment priority to Communities and Place.

Appendix E – Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation activity in NUL included **process, impact and economic evaluation**. To provide evidence for these strands, the following data collection and analysis was completed.

Process evaluation

- **Context review:** An initial review of the evolution of the local context was conducted including consideration of the socio-economic conditions and associated local strategies. This was achieved through a review of NUL’s Council’s strategy documents and local socio-economic data sourced from a targeted online review.
- **Document review:** Local documentation related to UKSPF was reviewed to provide background information to the process evaluation e.g. UKSPF Governance Plan produced by NUL and intervention project performance reports.
- **Analysis of Management Information (MI):** Evidence on the progress of NUL’s delivery of the programme was compiled from monitoring information sourced both from the latest quarterly return sent to MHCLG in March 2025. The MHCLG return required reporting on the cumulative achievement of outputs and outcomes against the investment as a whole.
- **Stakeholder research and in-depth qualitative beneficiary research:** A programme of qualitative stakeholder interviews was undertaken directly by the place level evaluation team across two waves (November 2024- January 2025 and March 2025-Aug 2025). Across the two waves, some repeat interviews were conducted (principally with LA and delivery stakeholders) to capture ongoing perceptions of process or updates. In total, across both waves, qualitative data collection included 34 interviews with NULBC, delivery partners and beneficiaries

The interviews were guided by topic guides to ensure consistency and comprehensiveness in the data collection process. These guides helped structure the interviews and ensured that all relevant topics were covered. Interviews were predominantly conducted using MS Teams with a few in person visits. The analysis approach involved reviewing and synthesising the qualitative data to identify key themes and insights.

- **Local evaluation activity:** A locally commissioned phase 1 evaluation brochure was produced by NULBC. Specifically, this provided qualitative insights in terms of beneficiaries both with businesses supported by projects in the Supporting Local Businesses investment priority and beneficiaries of Communities and Place projects. In addition to these evaluations, other projects also produced a range of case studies/ student participant feedback from some of the activity delivered provided additional evidence of their achievements. These have been used in the place level evaluation to provide context and further evidence of the outcomes achieved by projects.

Impact evaluation

To deliver the impact evaluation a theory-based evaluation design, specifically contribution analysis approach³¹ was used. The potential for implementing Quasi Experimental Design (QED) approaches for impact evaluation of the NUL programme was carefully considered across each of the projects in scope for the evaluation. The conclusion of this was, however, that it was not feasible to deliver QED approaches during the case study delivery period due to challenges in developing appropriate counterfactual cases.

Standardised contribution outcomes and hypotheses were developed as part of the contribution analysis approach, to be applied across all place level evaluations to aid subsequent synthesis of evidence. Relevant outcomes and hypotheses were selected for NUL based on a review of the Theory of Change and evidence available. This was sense checked through a stakeholder workshop held on 2nd October 2024. A contribution analysis workshop was held on 15th July 2025 – to update the ToC and discuss contribution claims.

For each hypothesis, the contribution of UKSPF was assessed through three main criteria, using a 4-point scale will be to determine the strength of contribution claims:

- a. Attribution - whether the changes in outcomes were directly/indirectly linked to the intervention
- b. Evidence in support of hypothesis – desired change in observed outcomes
- c. Evidence to refute the hypothesis – no change or negative change in the observed outcomes

A system of rubrics was used to determine the quality and denote what is admissible evidence to be used for testing each hypothesis.

The impact evaluation drew on the following evidence:

- **Management information** provided evidence on the effectiveness of UKSPF, providing insight into the performance of the different investment priorities and intervention types.
- **Stakeholder and beneficiary research** as described above, provided data on the outcomes and contribution of UKSPF. Alongside questions on process, the interviews explored emerging outcomes from the perspectives of different stakeholder groups and how far any changes observed could be attributed to UKSPF funded activity.
- Similarly, the **locally commissioned evaluation brochure and case studies** provided evidence on the outcomes and impact of specific intervention projects, serving to gather evidence from a wider pool of beneficiaries.

³¹ Contribution Analysis is a theory-based method, which was used to help explain and understand the contribution of different factors to the achievements of the NUL UKSPF investment.

- **Secondary datasets** were accessed and analysed as a potential source of impact evidence. This included data from the 2024/25 Community Life Survey, an annual, nationally representative survey of adults in England, commissioned by the UK government. It explores key themes such as social cohesion, volunteering, civic engagement, and wellbeing. The survey provides valuable longitudinal data that helps policymakers and local authorities understand how communities are changing over time. For the purpose of this evaluation, the survey data for 2024/25 was available at local authority level and provided insights into local area satisfaction and community pride, key themes being addressed by UKSPF. However, its use was more limited in assessing the contribution of UKSPF as it was difficult to robustly attribute any observed changes or results to UKSPF activity specifically. Data from previous years (2023/24) was available for NUL specifically but only for a small number of questions. It also provided some insights into general trends in England.

Economic evaluation

The economic evaluation of NUL UKSPF was guided by the National Audit Office's (NAO) 4E's framework, focusing on the economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity of the programme. Specifically, a Value for Money (VfM) assessment was conducted as the absence of a QED approach to impact, meant it was not possible to utilise a Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA). The VfM assessment drew on quantitative and quantitative data from the process and impact evaluation approaches to answer a series of questions across the 4Es as shown in Table A1 overleaf.

Table A 2 Value for money assessment - 4Es evaluation questions

Evaluation question	Management information	Secondary data sources	Stakeholder research	Beneficiary research	Wider literature
Economy					
How far did the UKSPF interventions attract sufficient volumes of potential suppliers to ensure VfM?	✓		✓		
To what extent did the procurement and award processes used ensure delivery of interventions to the required quality and value for money?	✓		✓		
How well were target timelines for the launch and delivery of interventions met and did this support delivery on budget?	✓		✓		✓
To what extent did the delivery of interventions meet initial expenditure expectations?	✓		✓		
Efficiency					
To what extent did the interventions deliver the number of outputs initially expected and within the expected budget?	✓		✓	✓	✓
How did the interventions secure the maximum number of outcomes given the budget allocation?	✓		✓	✓	
How effectively did the interventions combine UKSPF with other funds to achieve outputs?	✓		✓		
Effectiveness					
To what extent did the interventions deliver the number of outcomes / is expected to deliver the number of outcomes initially expected and within the expected budget?	✓		✓	✓	✓
How did the interventions achieve the maximum number of outcomes given the budget?	✓	✓	✓	✓	
To what extent did the outcomes achieved meet the needs of the local area?		✓	✓		✓
Equity					
Have the interventions been delivered to the target beneficiary groups set out in the initial plans?	✓		✓	✓	
To what extent were the initial target beneficiary groups / areas the most appropriate to receive UKSPF support?		✓	✓		✓

Appendix F – Contribution Analysis Framework

ToC element	Causal hypothesis	Evidence to strengthen hypothesis	Evidence to refute hypothesis	Tests to determine contribution
Improved perceptions of facilities and amenities	Increased usage of local facilities due to enhancements and programmes to engage the community to make use of facilities.	<p>Increase in related metrics on 'Your Community, Your Say' survey or the Community Life survey.</p> <p>Positive stakeholder perceptions of facilities and amenities.</p>	<p>No change in related metrics on 'Your Community, Your Say' survey or the Community Life survey</p> <p>Negative stakeholder perceptions of facilities and amenities.</p>	<p>Assessing perceptions of local facilities and amenities.</p> <p>Consideration of other contextual factors that may have resulted in observed change.</p>
Increased footfall	<p>Improvements to local businesses in the town centre attract more individuals to town centres, so there is an increase in footfall.</p> <p>Arts, cultural, heritage and creative events centred around historic Newcastle-under-Lyme sites attract visitors to the town and subsequently there is an increase in footfall.</p>	<p>Increased footfall in town centre.</p> <p>Increased visitor numbers to CML and NUL town during events.</p>	<p>No change in footfall in town centre.</p> <p>Low visitor numbers during events.</p>	<p>Assessing changes in footfall in town centres.</p> <p>Consideration of other contextual factors that may have resulted in observed change.</p>
Increased Volunteering opportunities	Capacity building support and the specific focus on increasing volunteer numbers offers more volunteering opportunities and	Increase in number of volunteers and local volunteering rate.	No change in number of volunteers or local volunteering rate.	Measuring change in volunteering numbers/rate.

ToC element	Causal hypothesis	Evidence to strengthen hypothesis	Evidence to refute hypothesis	Tests to determine contribution
	encourages individuals to get involved in volunteering opportunities.	Increase in related metrics on Community Life survey.	No change in related metrics on Community Life survey	Consideration of other contextual factors that may have resulted in observed change.
Increased business births	Business support programmes enable entrepreneurs to access business coaching and/ or networks to help establish themselves.	Increase in the number of new businesses Positive findings in business consultations about business uptake of support and attendance at festivals.	No change in the number of new businesses Negative findings in business consultations about business uptake of support and attendance at festivals.	Measure the number of new businesses in NUL. Consideration of other contextual factors that may have resulted in observed change.
Enhanced business productivity	Business support through grants, training or advice supported businesses to implement changes leading to higher productivity of the firm.	Positive insights from businesses about changes made and how these have led to improved productivity e.g. by reducing costs, increasing sales, increasing efficiency.	Insights from businesses indicate changes have not been made following support or that these changes did not lead to improved productivity e.g. by reducing costs, increasing sales, increasing efficiency.	Capture evidence of enhanced business productivity in supported businesses. Consideration of other contextual factors that may have resulted in observed change

ToC element	Causal hypothesis	Evidence to strengthen hypothesis	Evidence to refute hypothesis	Tests to determine contribution
<p>Increased innovation and adoption of new technologies within local businesses</p>	<p>Business support enables businesses to take on new products, technology, or processes, as a result of financial support, training or advice.</p>	<p>Positive findings in business consultations about adoption of new products, technology, or processes.</p> <p>Positive stakeholder perceptions of businesses adopting new products, technology, or processes.</p>	<p>Negative findings in business consultations about adoption of new products, technology, or processes.</p> <p>Negative stakeholder perceptions of businesses adopting new products, technology, or processes.</p>	<p>Measure number of businesses registered introducing new products, technology, or processes.</p> <p>Consideration of other contextual factors that may have resulted in observed change.</p>
<p>Increased employability and reduction of barriers</p>	<p>Employability and support projects help individuals gain employment by providing life skills, volunteering, job search support, and other services.</p>	<p>Positive local data on individuals who participated in employability projects.</p> <p>Positive stakeholder perceptions of employability and support programmes.</p>	<p>No change in local data on individuals who participated in employment and training projects.</p> <p>Negative stakeholder perceptions of programmes.</p>	<p>Assess change in skill and employment outcomes for individuals in receipt of related projects.</p> <p>Consideration of other contextual factors that may have resulted in observed change.</p>
<p>Increased confidence around employment prospects.</p>	<p>Employment support helps individuals through soft and social skills development, networking opportunities</p>	<p>Positive stakeholder or beneficiary perceptions</p>	<p>Negative stakeholder or beneficiary perceptions</p>	<p>Assess change in skill, confidence and employment outcomes for individuals in receipt of related projects.</p>

