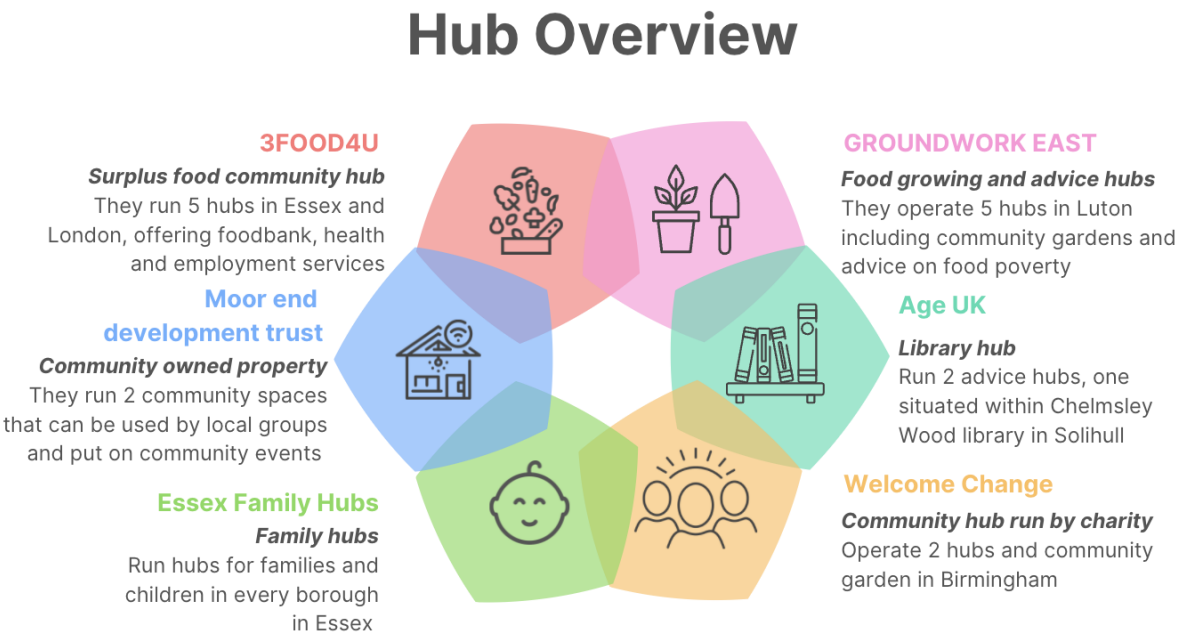
Community hub interviews

This is a brief overview of the discussions we had with each hub on Wednesday 23rd of February. There were 6 interviews conducted with different hub models, an introduction to them can be seen in figure 1 (for a more in-depth introduction see the briefing sheet).



Service provision

A myriad of services are offered by the hubs we interviewed, as seen by the figure below.

The service provision varied greatly, even within different hub organisations, due to the differing needs of the communities they served. The diagram below highlights some examples of the services that were provided by the different hubs. More specifically, Welcome Change and the Age UK hubs focused on being multifaceted advice hubs, centralising advice services under one roof. Their staff and volunteers were able to give advice on issues. These hubs commented that they often found community members turning up for help with one issue, but by talking to members of staff it became apparent that they needed more help. They were then able to refer individuals for the help they needed, with Age UK having over 800 referral pathways.

3FOOD4U, GroundWork East (GE) and Change UK, all offered food services to their community. This ranged from small food bank services to food growing community gardens which served food banks. As aforementioned, one of the benefits which was noted about the provision of food within the hub, was the benefit of getting community members in the door that needed wider help. All providers mentioned that while the provision of food was not meant to be a long-term solution, it allowed members of the community to access additional help and get wider advice and interventions which could improve their situation.

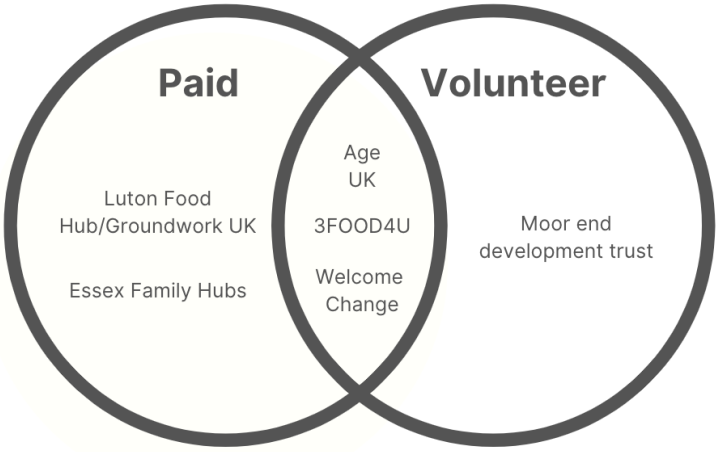
A notion that was echoed throughout the hubs, was the provision to improve the community. While they offered services they deemed were plugging a hole, a short-term solution, their main aims were to prevent these problems happening in the first place. The Essex Family hubs, in illustration, while offering immediate support such as clothing, also provide parenting classes to parents at risk. Moreover, the GE food hubs used community planting sessions of vegetables to educate local people on how to cook healthy meals to help tackle the obesity crisis in Luton.

The service provision for many of the hubs was also about bringing people together. Having service provision under one roof, meant that different members of the community were brought together. However, it must be noted that while Lucy from Age UK noted the benefits, she had found that privacy was required when dealing with sensitive topics to avoid embarrassment. She mentioned there was a fine line between encouraging community mixing and scaring people in need away for fear of their issues being made public.

Management and staff

Each of the hubs had a different way of structuring the way their hubs were run, mainly dictated by the nature of the hub. As can be seen in the diagram below, a majority of the hubs employed at least one member of staff. Moor End Development Trust (MEDT), who currently do not employ anyone directly to run the hub, commented that when they expand next year into a bigger building, and thus a bigger offering, they will need to employ a full-time member of staff. The Luton food hub said having a member of staff running the hub had been ‘essential’ to their

success, as it allowed someone to focus specifically on ways to further the hub. This sentiment was mirrored by Age UK, who commented that while volunteers were useful to do administration tasks and work on befriending clients, they could not run purely on volunteers due to time restraints and the unreliability of volunteers whom do not have monetary motivation to turn up. Their representative commented that by paying staff they were able to focus solely on the client's full time, whereas their volunteers tended only to be able to give short amounts of time.



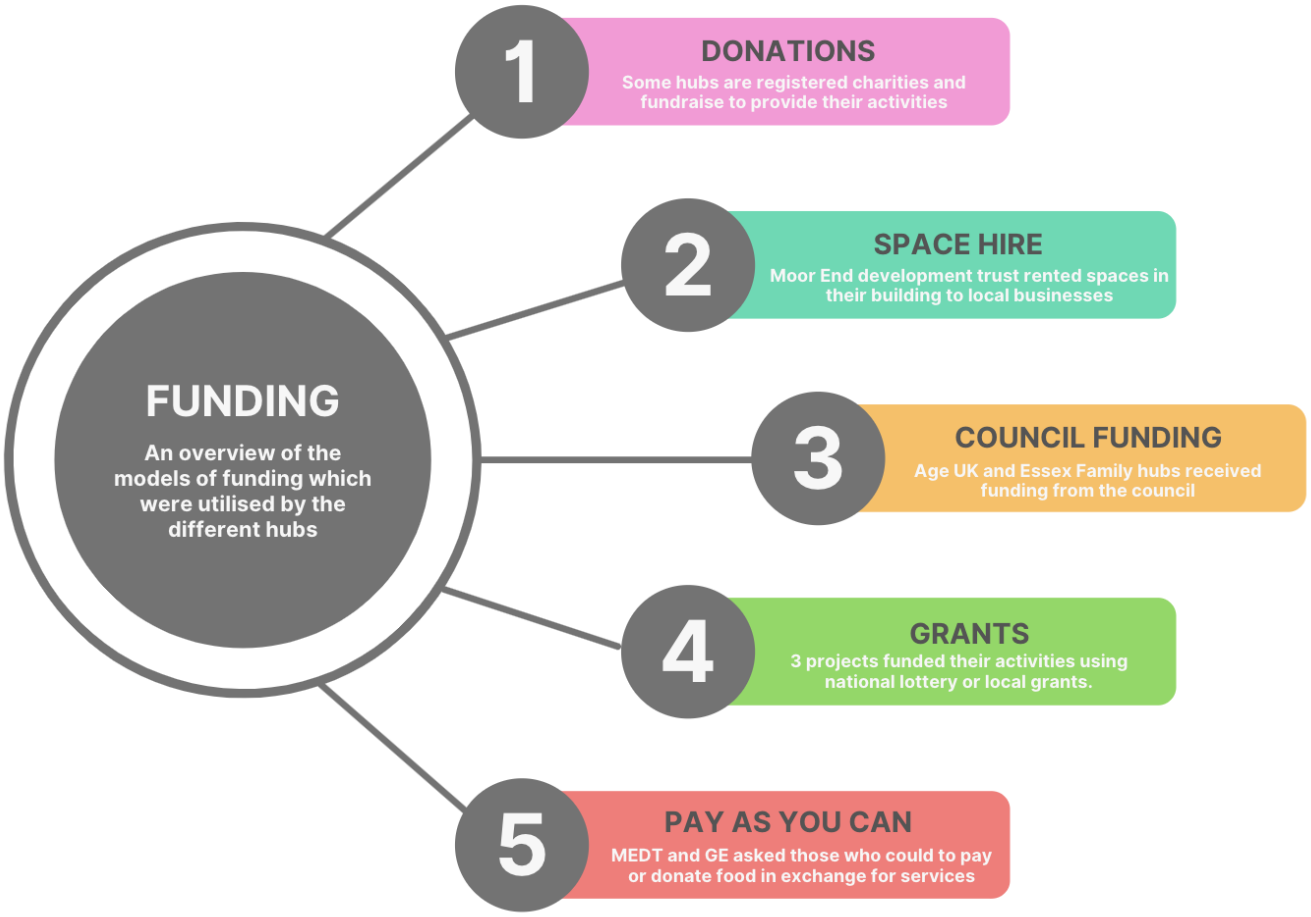
Example of community guided provision

Nick from the MEDT spoke about a local retired police officer noting the lack of services for male well being offered at the hub and how many of the men he knew in the community were suffering. He suggested a men's mental health club, where men could come and meet and talk through any issues they had, or simply be in the company of other men. This club quickly became very popular among the community, helping many men seek help for their mental health, something which was often seen as taboo.

Finance

None of the hubs charged members of the community for their services. However, each one had its own unique funding model. As seen in figure, there were five main funding sources for the hubs. Grants represented a large part of the funding for most of the hubs, with grants ranging from less than £10,000 to £3 million. Most of these grants were given for a specific time frame of provision, for example for GE this was 5 years of national lottery funding. It was noted that this reliance on grant funding made the sustainability of these projects hard in the long term, as the funding was not secure. The council funded the Age UK hub as a way of streamlining several different services under one roof. This came through a complex bidding system, where Age UK were chosen as the sole provider of a large range of advice.

In terms of service provision, only the MEDT offered paid services alongside their free provision. They rent out spaces in their buildings to businesses and groups that need the space. This then funds community activities within the hubs, such as music groups and sewing clubs. This meant their hubs were entirely self-funding. This was only an option however as the trust owned, or had a long-term council lease on the properties, so were able to rent them out. GE occasionally asked people to bring along donations of food items in return for their community garden sessions, but this was never compulsory, and the food was donated to local food banks. All of the other hubs offered their services completely free of charge and welcomed all members of the community. This meant they were entirely reliant on their funding sources, with no revenue being generated.



Accessing need and future planning

While the hubs varied greatly in their initial and specific method of assessing need, a central tenet to each of their approaches was grassroots assessment. Each of the hubs highlighted the importance of speaking to their service users and members of the community – asking what they wanted to see from the community hub. This 'community guided' approach permeated through each of the models, with many of

the hubs initially identifying there was need for their organisations through communicating with local people. A collection of the hubs, the ones with council or larger funding budgets (Essex Family hubs and Age UK) supplemented these methods with official public consultations and usage figures to assess need. For example, Lucy from Age UK spoke about having a database which tracked every person's contact with the hubs, so points of need in service provision could be monitored. Additionally, Groundwork East and Age UK noted using national and local data to assess the need in their area. Groundwork East explained they used local figures on food poverty to see in which areas hubs would be best located.

Community engagement

Attracting new community members, for the large part, was done through word-of-mouth for each of the hubs. They also utilised social media to advertise their provision, in particular during COVID-19. Victoria, from Welcome Change explained that often in close knit communities, neighbours are best placed to know who needs provision and spread the word. They also found schools a useful place to spread the word about their services, as the schools had knowledge of who was at risk of being in need.

Measuring output

Due to the differences in service provision, each hub differed on the output measure used and none, bar Age UK and Essex Family hubs, mentioned official channels of output measurement. However each hub asked service users for feedback on a regular basis and adjusted as a result. They also looked at the statistics of their service use to find out what was being done. Age UK spoke about having monthly reviews of the services they offer and holding regular public consultations. They also monitored advice service contacts as a measurement of output, having a database of over 30,000 service users' experiences. Essex family hubs mapped the pathway of their service users throughout their provision by the hub to see their effectiveness. Moreover, a feedback sheet placed near the exit was seen as an efficient way to receive community feedback. As well as improvements to current services, the sheets could ask for new services the community wanted in order to generate new ideas.

Magic ingredient

We asked some of the hubs what they thought the magic ingredient to their success was:

Age UK - ***Staff*** - How much they cared about their community and were willing to do whatever they could to help

Groundwork East - ***Having paid staff*** - This allowed them to give a lot more time and effort to promoting the hubs

MEDT - ***Taking it slow*** - They found that by taking the process of all adjustment and acquisition decisions slowly, they were able to make sure the services and buildings provided suited the specific community need.
3FOOD4U – ***Volunteers and staff*** - Much like Age UK, their success rested on the care shown by volunteers and staff, making everyone feel welcome and not embarrassed to enter the hubs.